Mindfulness and Leadership

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SYNOPSIS

The word "mindfulness" is occurring with increasing frequency, and is the subject of a rapidly expanding research literature. Interest is also fast spreading within the leadership domain. At the moment, however, mindfulness in the context of leadership — or mindful leadership — is still an idea in the early stages of development and validation. This paper sets out to understand more about the concept, and to consider what mindfulness might offer to the practice of leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

The word "mindfulness" is occurring with increasing frequency and is the subject of a rapidly expanding research literature. While most formal discussions on the topic have their roots in the clinical and therapeutic settings or in meditative practices, interest is fast spreading to the leadership domain. That said, mindfulness in the context of leadership — or mindful leadership — is a recently conceived idea still in the early stages of development and validation. There exists less than a decade of research evidence around mindfulness in the workplace, much less its application to leadership. But drawing on what is known of its effectiveness in other fields, we are persuaded that extending mindfulness to the leadership context may bring about considerable benefits. We set out to understand more about the concept, and to consider what mindfulness might offer to the practice of leadership.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

There is almost universal agreement that a basic component of mindfulness is the deliberate and prolonged focusing of one's attention on immediate experiences, both external and internal, as they unfold from moment to moment (Little, 2011). Two points are worth unpacking for a deeper appreciation of mindfulness: the focusing of attention, as well as directing it on the present. Langer's (1997) study on the nature of mindful attention found that contrary to conventional understanding, focusing and prolonging attention is hardly about intense concentration upon a single still image in the mind (she uses the analogy of focusing a camera), because one quickly realises how difficult it is to remain on-task by this method. Instead, attention is more effectively sustained when individuals constantly seek to notice new things about the stimulus (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Attention, construed this way, complements the other aspect of mindfulness which emphasises a focus on the present. The premise here is that there is a significant amount of information that goes unnoticed when one is not fully attending to an occurring moment, or when one makes quick leaps of inferences and jumps to conclusions about the state of things based on personal preconceptions. The assumption is that these observations, once missed, are impossible to recover after the event, yet can sharpen self-insight and decision-making if acquired. Hence by being fully engaged with the here and now, one may profit from harnessing as much of this potential as possible. In short, mindfulness is not so much about how much attention is being paid, as it is about how attention is paid and to what purpose.

The realisation that our inferences and conclusions may change (if not improve) as we become more adept at capturing the important details of immediate experience, also attunes us to the tentative nature of these conclusions. For example, things we take to be similar may have meaningful differences that we have failed to notice, while two apparently different matters may have more in common than we think. There is often more to a situation than meets the eye, and an appreciation of this shifts us towards more adaptive mindsets; it opens us up to the idea of uncertainty and possibilities. While we are still required to exercise judgment and make decisions, we are less inclined to remain fixed on the opinions and decisions derived, especially when they are no longer relevant and need to be adapted or replaced. Mindfulness, then, is further characterised by an acceptance of reality in an open, non-judgmental way. This calm accommodation of our observations, without a harried need to interpret all of them so that they are consistent with our worldview, translates into one or more of the following expressions depending on the circumstances: (1) openness to novelty; (2) sensitivity to different contexts; and (3) consideration for multiple perspectives (Langer, 1997).
Langer (1992) extends the notion and proposes that a key feature of mindfulness lies in its regulatory function to the otherwise autopilot of ingrained behaviours and habitual responses. The term Siegel (2010) uses is mindsight, such that we are continually attending to the way we respond to cues in the environment, and reflecting on the conscious and unconscious reasons behind those actions; it is as though we are "seeing" how our mind is working. We may think of this as distancing our reflective self from the acting self, thereby being doubly present in a situation as we become both actor and observor (of the action) within a single situation. As we are made even more present, we can then begin to notice the patterns and triggers that determine when we respond directly to external cues, and when we act based on our inferences. Critically, this heightened level of awareness increases the possibility that we uncover the redundant assumptions that we may have relied upon in the past, and leads us to create new, and more appropriate categories by which we make sense of our world. This is similar to the notion of reflection-in-action proposed by Schon (1983), where actions are taken as experiments and which need to be scrutinised even as they are going on, so that the hypotheses upon which they are based may be tested and adjusted as necessary. Mindfulness, in this sense, constitutes an active form of attending, because it necessitates decisions to be made and actions to be taken as a result of the feedback obtained from this regulation mechanism.

**Operational definition: Key elements of mindfulness**

In summary, we offer the following operational definition of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a state in which an individual:

- deliberately focuses attention,
- on present (internal and external) experiences,
- in an open, non-judgmental way;
- while regulating personal assumptions and preconceptions.

Mindfulness in the prevailing operational definition is mindfulness of attention, not of the object of attention. In other words, it is the practice of mindfulness that determines the form and manner in which our attentional resources may be strategically deployed, rather than a consequence of mere concentration upon an article or subject. This difference is significant, especially in the following section where we examine the applications of mindfulness within the leadership context.

**THE PLACE OF MINDFULNESS IS LEADERSHIP**

So, what then might be the place of mindfulness in leadership? If central to the concept of mindfulness are notions of a clearer way of perceiving the world, and a more conscious understanding of how one interacts and makes sense of it, then mindfulness must be integral to leadership. For, as expressed by Little (2011), "if leadership is, in some degree, about seeing clearly what is going on, about making a determination about the best course of action and then taking it, then it demands of leaders that they take pains to understand how they see the world, from what point of view, with what distortions and with what intent".

In this section, we elaborate on four key aspects in which mindfulness is relevant and critical for the practice of effective leadership.

**Mindfulness as an enabling and foundational capability for leadership**

Much of leadership literature has been concerned with the identification of the list of capabilities, skills, traits, dispositions, motivations, and so on, that are thought to be foundational elements that enable an individual to demonstrate effective leadership. Could mindfulness be another one of these qualities to be added to the list? Ambrosini, Bowman and Collier (2009) posited the notion of meta-capabilities, that is, capabilities which are involved in the organisation of other capabilities and without which, other capabilities cannot thrive; expressed differently, they are capabilities that enable or amplify the other inherent capabilities. We take the view that mindfulness is a foundational and enabling ingredient for leadership, and can be construed as a meta-capability. This is chiefly because if mindfulness is the "art of paying attention" (Caudron, 2001), and attention informs how we process and act upon our experiences, then it must surely be instrumental to how we apply our faculties and capabilities to influence the world around us. In other words, while one might have many capabilities and talents that are associated with leadership, without the mediating and enabling influence of mindfulness, the effective application of these capabilities and talents to situations requiring leadership may be absent, diminished, or even misappropriated.

It seems obvious enough that how one attends to or perceives the world is directly related to the quality of the actions taken in response to it, and one would do well to be more mindful. Yet, as Hunter and Scherer (2010) have highlighted, much of modern management and indeed modern education has favoured the conceptual and abstract over the perceptual, and they have further suggested that "not paying attention to attention" is a cultural blindspot of the West. One practical workplace illustration is the
way multi-tasking (the ability to split one's attention across many tasks) is observed to be an "ability" that many boast about possessing. In spite of the common "wisdom" that leaders need to multi-task to cope with multiple demands, research by Hunter and Scherer (2010) provide evidence that chronic multi-tasking can lead to a form of neural de-evolution which is not good for high productivity because multi-taskers become habituated to using a primitive part of the brain, the part associated with creating rote and inflexible memories.

In summary, this leads one to conclude that the greater the extent to which a leader can harness, manage and focus his or her attention, the more effective his or her leadership actions are likely to be.

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**The Brain on Autopilot (paraphrased from Hunter & Scherer, 2010)**

In the interest of managing limited cognitive resources, the brain moves a repeated action or belief from the conscious control of the evolutionarily newer and more complex prefrontal cortex to the instinctual and much older basal ganglia. This transfer turns conscious and intentional behaviour gradually into a non-conscious and automatic habit. The newly formed habit, when triggered, will often play out rigidly and unknowingly. It becomes, literally, unthinking and non-adapting, even unproductive. Not only that, this habit also takes over from intentional behaviour as the default response to subsequent occurrences of the situation which gave rise to this habit.

In comparison, research has also found that individuals who focused their attention exercised a more sophisticated part of the brain, namely, the hippocampus. This part of the brain creates more flexible memories and allows for a deeper, more robust knowing. The result is a greater ability to apply more nuanced understanding when dealing with challenges.

**MINDFULNESS AND JUDGMENT IN A COMPLEX WORLD**

As articulated in the prevailing definition above, mindfulness involves taking a non-judgmental stance, and is associated with openness and curiosity. Leadership, however, as it is ordinarily described, necessarily involves judgment, for it is usually associated with assessment of risk, decisiveness, and action, all of which involve judgment. To square this apparent circle, Little (2011) suggests that "we may adopt a formula that allows the mindful leader to pay deliberate attention to his or her process of judging, conscious that he or she may have inadequate information, may be prejudiced, may rely on an inadequate store of relevant experience, may simply be wrong, so that, when a decision is made and action taken, the chance of it having been the best decision (and least harmful) is improved". In other words, mindfulness, in its capacity as a regulatory mechanism, is a means of mitigating judgment as it raises awareness of the moment-to-moment prejudices, assumptions, and preconceived evaluations that typically accompany our thoughts; it facilitates the differentiation of personal biases and reactions from the more observable or objective aspects of realities, and coupled with the element of a mental openness for taking in new and even contradictory data and perspectives, can bring about greater clarity and possibly a more complete understanding of issues and situations. So, perhaps it may be that with mindfulness, the likelihood for greater discernment, perspective and wisdom — which are fundamental to the exercise of good judgment in decision-making — is increased.

Atkins (2008), in applying the concept of mindfulness to leadership in a world of increasing complexity, makes a similar argument that the demands of public sector leadership increasingly call for the capacity to creatively and consciously move between pure observation and judgment. He states that "focusing on what 'is' rather than our inferences allows us to discover new facets of our experience and act more creatively instead of being constrained by old habits of thinking. For example, most of the time, most of us are entirely unaware of the layers of judgment and evaluation we add to situations, thereby decreasing the possibility of perceiving from a different viewpoint or acting in a new way." He further comments that a wise leader is someone who has "a capacity to step back somewhat from experience, to see his experience in context. Rather than being swept up in experiences, to have experiences! and concludes that "to live wisely we must learn to watch our experience while living it".

In the current leadership landscape where leaders (and in fact all of us) are said to operate within an increasingly complex environment, the complexity is far less about the sheer volume of data that they are expected to deal with, but more about the volatile, ambiguous and unpredictable nature of human reality. Lam (2010) notes that "current risk management systems and other attempts to predict the future are based too much on linear relationships derived from past experience, and fail to take into account our behavioural limitations in handling probabilities, and also the nature of complex non-linear systems which do not
always have a definite or repeatable cause and effect relationship”. The author goes on to say that "we need to recognise the behavioural and cognitive biases we are subject to; the time constraints that we act under, and the system of thinking we rely on. Above all, we need to adopt a model of critical thinking that challenges rules established from prior observation”. Siegel (2010) metaphorically describes such a process of critical thinking as applying a scalpel to re-sculpt our neural pathways so that we get off the autopilot of ingrained behaviours and habitual responses. Mindfulness facilitates this form of critical thinking, and in so doing, we become more adaptive to the complex challenges that we will increasingly be confronted with.

**MINDFULNESS: LEARNING TO SEE IN ORDER TO CHANGE**

*We must become the impartial spectators of our own character and conduct*

--- Adam Smith

Mindfulness, in many ways, is about enhancing the way we perceive and expanding the scope of what we notice. In the above section, we discussed how this way of perceiving facilitates the quality of analysis and decision-making. In this section, we turn the spotlight inwardly on ourselves and consider how mindfulness alters the way we look at ourselves, powers self-awareness and becomes the starting point for personal transformative change to occur. This is critical in leadership as we agree with Kegan and Lahey (2009) that what distinguishes one's leadership from others' in this new century is the ability to develop oneself, people and teams, and where development is not about the adding of new skills or even the expansion of one's repertoire of responses (that, they consider to be "learning"), but involves a more transformative change that is associated with greater mental complexity.

Transformation begins with awareness. Mindfully directing attention makes conscious the unconscious and enables us to pause and "see" what hitherto might have simply been a habitual thought or instinctive reaction. Being more mindful of how we are feeling or thinking, in the moment, increases the possibility for us to create some distance between our thoughts and feelings, with the subsequent actions and decisions that we take. Therefore, mindfulness leads to the possibility of choice and allows us to exercise a greater conscious influence over our subsequent responses and actions. This reduces the probability for our actions to be borne out of habit, or because we have been triggered, or simply because we have not stopped to consider alternatives. Over time, as our attention is strengthened, we become more aware of our habitual ways of behaving that are ineffective or counterproductive, and are better able to make a conscious choice as to whether these should be abandoned in favour of something more adaptive to the present circumstances. We must learn to see, in order to change (Hunter and Scherer, 2010).

**MINDFULNESS, SELF-AWARENESS AND LEADING WITH HUMILITY**

There is no doubt that as rewarding as leadership can be, it is a demanding and stressful activity. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) coined the term "power stress" to refer to the stress that individuals in leadership positions experience and which is caused by a combination of responsibility, constant self-control and the inevitable crises that the leadership role demands. Indeed, a large degree of the stress can be attributed to the many tensions embodied within a leader as he or she faces multiple, sometimes conflicting demands, and where personal needs are frequently subordinate to organizational needs.

They further contend that when leaders face power stress over the long term and are unable to find sustainable ways to manage its detrimental effects, they risk becoming trapped in the Sacrifice Syndrome which they describe as "a vicious circle leading to mental and physical distress, and sometimes even executive burnout". They elaborate that some symptoms and characteristics of individuals who exhibit the Sacrifice Syndrome are that he or she may find that "things begin to slip at work and/or at home; small problems may seem more than usually troublesome; relationships may become strained; self-confidence may slip and physical health may suffer as well. Some people may even begin to act out; they may make rash decisions, act impulsively or do things that seem to contradict their values." This led them to conclude that a leader is not able to sustain others if he cannot sustain himself, and to advocate the need for leaders to create ways of renewing themselves.

McKee, Johnston and Massimilian (2006) write about true renewal involving three key elements, of which mindfulness is the first. They suggest that mindfulness allows one to courageously ask questions such as "am I acting in concert with my values? Am I the leader I aspire to be? How am I doing managing the stress of my current situation? How are my key people feeling these days? Are we in sync with each other?" and such questions help one to maintain psychological and emotional equilibrium, to act in greater concert with one's convictions and values, and facilitate openness to feedback from the people around.
While we may disagree with the somewhat magical thinking that asking such questions would naturally lead to positive outcomes, it is hard to disagree with the argument that with greater reflection, introspection and thereby self-awareness, we are led towards holding ourselves with a more profound sense of honesty and gentleness. George (2010), a key proponent of Authentic Leadership, while confessing that he does not know what mindfulness is, accepts that self-awareness is integral to it and suggests that "as leaders learn to accept their weaknesses, failures, and vulnerabilities, just as they appreciate their strengths and successes, ... they gain compassion for themselves and the ability to relate to the world around them in authentic ways. This frees them from the need to adopt pretenses to impress other people." So, mindfulness helps us to see ourselves with greater clarity and puts us in touch with our own humanity. In so doing, we too learn to see and accept others in all their humanity — with their unique talents, imperfections, and limitations — and this allows for more compassion, kindness and tolerance, and allows us to reach out to make real connections with people. In a similar vein, Little (2011) comments that "the concomitants of mindfulness are dialogue, openness, acceptance; if systematic self-consciousness teaches anyone anything, it must surely be humility and tolerance." Which of us would not wish for more of such attributes in those who lead?

**CONCLUSION**

We can think of no better way to conclude but to quote the reflections of Little (2011), who first introduced us to the concept of mindfulness, and who has been of tremendous influence in shaping our perspectives on leadership and leadership development. In his capacity as Advisor to the Centre for Leadership Development, we asked him to share his views on mindfulness and its relevance for leadership and leadership development. In producing a thesis on the subject, he concluded as follows:

*The question with which I started was “how can mindfulness be defined and operationalised as part of the capacity for leadership and as an element in leadership development?” I now understand that a better question is “what kind of leadership follows if we take mindfulness as a significant capability?” It seems to me that mindfulness leads us towards leadership; leadership that is a form of service, guided by principle and divorced from position or reward, characterised by humility and consideration and by a profound un-knowing. Leadership that is always questioning itself, others and the world, accepting that there is no single best path, but that a path must be taken and that it is better taken together, in a spirit of equality and comradeship before the mystery of existence and with perfect faith in the power of human beings together to adapt, to overcome adversity and to change the world for the better.*

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**NOTES**