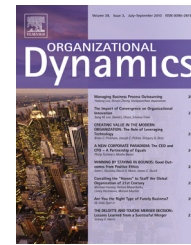




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Mindful leadership: Focusing leaders and organizations

Joshua Ehrlich

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This paper is an overview of current thinking and research on mindfulness and its application to leaders and organizations. It also offers a framework for practitioners and consultants to use in helping their clients to be more mindful as leaders. The importance of mindfulness in the current business environment has been highlighted by the many popular publications on the concept. What is missing is a rigorous approach to the application of mindfulness to leadership and organizational performance.

Increasing pressure and speed are all around us. Businesses are faced with intense market competition and so are trying to do more with less. As a result, the workplace is changing: we are moving faster, communicating more, and leveraging technology more extensively in almost every role. This helps us to be productive but also has significant consequences for our ability to learn, build relationships, and think. Although in hindsight it was clearly unrealistic, one of my clients, a global financial-services firm, committed to over 200 key strategic initiatives in 2011. Within this context, and with the help of technology, we see leaders and professionals working harder and paying attention less. CEOs

report feeling compelled to lead and respond to change as fast as possible and admit they struggle to prioritize and focus. The U.S. loses over one trillion dollars a year in productivity from work interruptions and employees seem to operate in a state of continuous partial attention. Beyond financial impacts, there are serious costs for our ability to lead, innovate, and live meaningful lives.

A study of Microsoft managers found that many of their own software products (such as email and instant messaging) interfere with their ability to complete tasks. Microsoft managers were interrupted on average 10–30 times per hour. After being interrupted it took them 10–25 min to get back on task. And one third of the time it took them over 30 hours to get back on task. Adding this up suggests the managers were almost never on task. They were spinning. It is a miracle they finished anything.

It is not just that we have more information coming at us that distracts us. We interrupt ourselves almost as often as others interrupt us. Think of how often you check e-mail. Most people say they check constantly. Why? Checking e-mail stimulates the same brain pathways as addiction. So we have

to ask ourselves if we are addicted to self-interruption. Unfortunately, it can become a vicious negative cycle. The less we pay attention, the harder it becomes to pay attention.

We often attempt to deal with increasing pressure by trying to do two things at once (i.e., multitasking). We tend to overestimate our ability to multitask, but our prefrontal cortex—the part of our brain that is responsible for our executive functioning (planning, prioritizing, and choosing)—can only focus on one thing at a time. When we think we are doing two things, we are actually switching rapidly back and forth between them. Like the Microsoft engineers, we are jumping from task to task, losing our place each time we switch, and having to find our way back. Given the reality of the modern work environment, successful managers need to be able to switch rapidly between tasks and to opportunistically respond to short and seemingly random events in their day. But what are the consequences of constant switching? When we multitask we end up going 40% slower and making twice as many mistakes. Multitasking lowers our performance on IQ tests up to 15 points. It not only hurts our IQ, it most likely impairs our emotional intelligence (EI), because we are focused away from the social cues that help us make good decisions. In my coaching work I see overloaded leaders showing up irritable and less able to adapt. Being so busy they have trouble empathizing with their direct reports or taking time to focus, reflect, and learn.

Not all technology and pace are bad. Interruptions can help us get creative ideas, and we have grown tremendously as the result of new innovation. The general population is 15 IQ points smarter than it was in 1960, and able to consume three times the information. That is an impressive evolutionary adaptation. Yet we are also 23 times more likely to get into a car accident when we text while driving. So we are not always smarter.

Mindfulness is a way of focusing and an attitude that has been proposed to help us be more effective in this new environment. Mindfulness can potentially mitigate the impact of information overload and accelerating complexity and change. Below is a model of mindful leadership based on six factors that emerge from mindfulness research (spirit, emotion, mind, body, connecting, and inspiring). Also included is a consideration of several applications of mindfulness for leaders, and provide suggestions as to how we can create mindful organizations.

MINDFULNESS

An alternative to the state of chronic distraction and busyness is a high-performance mindset. If we think of elite performers, athletes, or leaders, what words come to mind? Perhaps *clear-headed*, *engaged*, and *focused*. This is essentially the definition of mindfulness—present, open, and engaged attention.

Mindfulness is often associated with Eastern spiritual traditions and especially Buddhism. However, it has become the subject of a substantial amount of research conducted from a Western pragmatic perspective. Many organizations are starting to teach employees mindfulness, including Aetna, Apple, BlackRock, Diageo, Deutsche Bank, GAP, General Mills, Goldman Sachs, Google, Green Mountain

Coffee, Intel, McKinsey, Monsanto, Navigant, NY Life, Procter & Gamble, Target, The European Central Bank, The U.S. Army, The U.S. Marines, public schools, MBA programs, hospitals, and police departments. Fortune 500 companies are conducting research and documenting mindfulness benefits such as (1) focus, decision-making, memory, creativity, and learning; (2) communication, collaboration, and productivity; (3) emotional intelligence, well-being, and internal and client relationships; (4) job satisfaction and engagement; and (5) reduced stress, absenteeism, and turnover.

Mindfulness is relatively straightforward to learn. Most exercises involve paying attention to a single object or experience, and every time your attention wanders, simply coming back to that focus point. Mindful breathing, walking, eating, and listening are excellent beginning exercises. Try breathing mindfully for a few minutes. Just sit in your chair and feel your belly move in and out. You can put your hands on your stomach to further anchor your attention. Notice that your breathing begins to deepen and slow on its own. Your body may naturally relax as well, without any effort. Simply attending without intending can be quite powerful. When your mind wanders, smile to yourself and bring your attention back to your breathing. The smile is important. Mindfulness is not just about being concentrated in the present. It is about an attitude of openness and acceptance towards your experience. A common misconception about this exercise (also known as meditation) is that it is about stopping thinking. You cannot stop thinking, and trying to do so is counterproductive. You can, however, learn to focus your attention elsewhere. Another common misconception is that meditation is a spiritual practice. It can be, but it is increasingly being studied and practiced as a science-based mental exercise.

Mindfulness is a useful development tool because it gives you access to information. Scanning your internal and external environment gives you clues about your reactions and impact. Mindfulness thus suggests an “inside out” approach to learning and leadership that complements behavioral methods. Organizational psychology has focused on “outside-in” strategies such as practice, feedback, and modeling. These are great tools, but they are limited when we are trying to sustainably change behavior. We can quickly revert to old habits under stress if we do not have other skills or coping mechanisms available. Under any undue pressure or state of deprivation we become our worst, most primitive selves—poor decision-makers who are focused on our own needs. Under stress we are less conscious of our interpersonal impact, and 360 reviews of leaders have taught us how important perceptions are. However, it is not enough to just look at action and impact. When we focus leaders on how they are perceived, we can help them get better peer reviews, pay, and promotions but not always help them become more effective leaders. Truly effective leadership requires an inside-out approach. Authenticity, clear values, and vision create motivated and engaged teams.

MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

When we actively pay attention, we build self-awareness, which is the heart of leadership. We can think of awareness

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