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A mind to manage

Cheryl A. Rezek

UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this viewpoint is to bring attention to the application of mindfulness to those who lead and make decisions.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper focuses attention on both the leader as an individual as well as on the task at hand. Companies such as Deutsche Bank, Apple Inc, AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, Starbucks and KPMG use this technique and universities like Harvard advocate on its behalf.

Findings – Being mindful can profoundly influence the ethos and culture of an organisation as well as those at the centre of it who take the first step. It can shift the balance from feeling controlled to that of being focused and aware of how we manage our own minds and the impact of our decisions on individuals, organisations and services.

Social implications – This paper is important to any individual in a position of leadership, or for any organisation in considering how to formulate its approach to leadership and management. It also more broadly addresses the need for individuals to learn to take a mindful approach to understanding their own development needs, which will ensure a healthy relationship between leaders and their teams.

Originality/value – The paper will be of value to those in positions of leadership and management in various organisations, as well as students and academics of leadership practices.

Keywords Mindfulness, Leadership, Mindful, Awareness, Intention, Approach, Mindsets

A Mind to Manage

Why should a leader bother with the notion of mindfulness in today's turbulent world? There is little time for the luxury of personal development when our public service organisations are fighting for survival. However, the danger is that dismissing or ignoring the concept of mindfulness might mean that survival becomes less likely, not more.

Mindfulness is about paying attention to what is happening right here, right now. It is about focusing attention on the immediacy of the present in a way that allows this moment to be experienced and observed in a particular way. It involves developing a skill that allows the individual to engage actively with whatever is happening at the time as well as concurrently viewing it from a more observational and strategic standpoint. Both components are important as the former encourages the leader to respond to the situation with energy and a sense of newness whilst the latter gives perspective to it.

The two components are not separate styles but rather one approach that allows for each of the levels to function simultaneously. This description may raise the question of whether one is 'in' or 'out' of the situation and how it can be possible to be both at the same time. The reason it is possible is because when one is fully engaged with what is happening at a given moment, that heightened alertness to all that is taking place is what also allows one to be able to step back and view it as an observer. One can liken it to a journalist being in a war zone where there is gunfire and chaos threatening all but at the same time reporting on the events taking place. Alternatively, think of a tennis player who needs intense concentration and focus in each moment in order to hit the ball and place it but who is also required to read the other player's game and consider which tactic or angle to take so that it is played to his or her advantage. This skill is developed over a long period of time through ongoing practise and fine-tuning.

The question a leader might ask is how an ancient Eastern practice associated with orange-clothed chanting monks can have any relevance to a fast-paced, performance driven Western leadership style?

We live in a world with a dominant mindset that says we can control most forces, that everything is achievable and that power and single-minded determination will help reach these goals. We are led to believe that all unknowns should be known and factored in, and that what works now should be adhered to for future periods. The difficulty with this mindset is that it almost factors out transience, impermanence and flexibility because acknowledgment of them can create anxiety and a feeling that one doesn't have control over the situation, without which failure or defeat may occur.

The effect of a leader having a control-based mindset in the field of leadership and management is often more evident when viewed from a strategic perspective than from an immediate reactive one. Those who tighten the reins around their own open views, as well as those of their teams, may survive if the system facilitates or permits their more rigid views. However, the team members lose their creativity and fluidity and disharmony and discontent are likely to build up. The most talented members are squashed and will look elsewhere. The rigid manager may remain but at a cost to the overall performance and wellbeing of the team and the organisation.

An example of this is a man who headed a division in a large media company. His style of leadership tended to be traditional and top-down. He had a reputation of being inflexible which created an element of dissatisfaction amongst his staff. One afternoon he was involved in a road traffic accident that resulted in his requiring surgery. He returned to work within a couple of months but over time his once traditional leadership style gradually became rigid and chaotic and his decision-making more autocratic but less focused. He lacked clarity and he found it increasingly difficult to feel in control of his department. He was referred for an intervention that included mindfulness work over a 12-week period. During that time not only did his general level of wellbeing and mental stability increase but his leadership style began to shift. He moved from being autocratic and controlling to being more open and tolerant of ideas. He encouraged differences in opinion and creative suggestions, he developed an ability to respond to situations rather than react to them and he approached the same situations as before with a less stressed and demanding attitude. It was replaced with one of openness to ideas, a willingness to guide rather than dictate, greater clarity and increased perspective. In his words, he was now able to bring a mindful approach to his style of leadership that was of benefit to him as a leader and to the creativity, decision-making skills and productivity of his division.

To bring to a department or organisation the qualities of attention, focus and openness may not seem a new idea in the least, and it isn't. What may be new is that the individual leader approaches the work environment with these qualities in order to promote resonance rather than dissonance amongst the team. Resonance is when the leader is able to draw out the qualities of others, hold them in mind and encourage their use. Such a leader approaches requirements by paying attention to what is happening around him or her and to what is required, and then flexibly aligns these components, even in difficult times, in an open and considered manner. Dissonance tends to occur when the leader is more avoidant in approach and tends to control the situation using rules and demands regardless of the wellbeing of the people and the organisation (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Frequently, it is easier and less threatening to lead by demand as the goals are set and the route to achievement predetermined.

It is when that concrete and fenced route dares to deviate and the goals are not so easily attainable that the rule method begins to falter. If leaders have the will to consider that change is inevitable, they can then encourage and build in sufficient resilience in individuals, teams and the organisations to manage it from a resourceful and strengthened position.

To be mindful is to be alert and aware of what is happening in the present moment, for whatever it is, and to see it for what it is – a moment in time. Developing a more aware and considered approach allows the leader to respond to situations rather than react to them, whether in their own minds or to an external stimulus. It encourages a less critical and fixed view which, in turn, creates a more flexible and attuned response. It allows one to keep awareness of what is taking place at all levels and to see the subtleties and nuances of it as these are sometimes disregarded or avoided. When there is less clutter and fewer distractions within one's own head it is easier to gain clarity and perspective. It allows one to both notice more detail and see the bigger picture.

Noticing places us in the present as it focuses our attention on the immediacy of the situation and it makes us more sensitive and alert to the different dimensions that may be playing out. This can

provide the opportunity for one to evaluate them and to respond in the most appropriate and constructive way.

Imagine a circle with lots of dots chaotically jumping about. You'll recognise how difficult it is to stay focused on the one in the centre as your eyes are constantly forced to move around. However, if there is one central dot that is stable and you are able to simply observe the actions of the other dots from this standpoint, the chaos appears to lessen and a sense of calm can begin to emerge.

A mindful leader can reduce disordered activity by bringing focus and intent to the situation. By acknowledging and accepting the movement and change within it, the leader can step back, observe and respond with composure and purpose. There is often a misalignment between what we want to see and what we actually see. Our past experiences or immediate reactions will interfere with our ability to view the present circumstance in an unbiased way. Once we acknowledge this, we can go on to quieten our internal commentaries, assumptions and reactions and consider the actions and motivations of the situation at hand. This stepping aside from ourselves allows us to decide which approach will best support the agendas and strategies of the organisation.

For centuries, rational problem solving has been all important. The emphasis has been on unemotional logic and the notion that thinking leads to doing, that our cognitions are the determinants of our behaviours. This one-dimensional approach has gone on to create the belief that we can control and predict outcomes if we apply sufficient logic. What it failed to take into account is that our thoughts are only one component and that we are emotional and instinctual beings too.

The dramatic and protracted changes in so many sectors ranging from healthcare to employment are not specific to one western country. The spread of change, uncertainty and instability in economic and political circles indicates that the old guard principles may no longer have the same relevance as before. To lead knowing that change is inevitable, although unpredictable in its timing, allows for flexibility. Such an approach automatically builds in the realisation that what worked then may not necessarily be appropriate today. This helps to safeguard the organisation from disillusionment and destruction as it encourages and permits enquiry into new possibilities rather than enforce outdated rules.

Companies such as Google, 3M, General Mills and Apple have incorporated mindfulness training into their organisations with success. When times are good, we tend to become more complacent and less alert. When there is a crisis, we can become fixed on the problem and overlook issues on the outskirts of it. These companies want to avoid highs and lows, staff burnout or resignations and reactive management styles by training their staff in mindfulness. They provide facilities for their staff to meditate (dare one mention the word) and encourage mindful principles to be developed within individuals. The American Institute of Health, the University of Massachusetts and Harvard University's Mind/Body Medicine Institute are only some of the reputable organisations to provide compelling evidence on its efficacy. A few of their collective findings (Dolman & Bond, 2011) are that it:

- reduced the cost of staff absenteeism caused by illness, injury and stress
- improved cognitive functioning, memory, learning ability and creativity
- improved productivity and improved overall staff and business wellbeing

- reduced staff turnover and associated costs

In the UK, Ashridge Leadership Faculty (Dolman & Bond, 2011) conducted their own study but evaluated the personal effects it had on employees with results showing that 90% of those who meditated noted benefits, with 61% mentioning the most positive outcome being that it helped them feel calm.

General Mills, a Fortune 200 company with global interests, has a reputation for using, and initiating, cutting-edge leadership development such as the Mindful Leadership Programme series. Survey results from one of the Cultivating Leadership Presence courses reported that 82 % of participants reported a positive change in their ability to make better decisions with more clarity and 89% reported enhanced listening ability to themselves and to others (Marturano, 2011).

It is important to note that mindfulness skills can be cultivated and applied as an approach without meditative practices. Such practices are simply (although not simple) nonintrusive trainings in focusing attention and have little to do with loincloths or collegial group hugs. Some involve paying attention to how one goes about one's daily activities. Other practices focus on breathing. It may seem strange to think that one should learn to focus on such an automatic function as breathing, but if one considers that breathing equates to living then it isn't such an esoteric notion after all. These tasks provide invaluable experience of what it is like, and how difficult it is, to be present within a given moment of time, to suspend criticism and judgement, to manage the urge to get involved in one's train of thoughts and to disengage from the grips of a powerful feeling. They are about intentionally bringing a focused awareness to yourself and your responses. This awareness is then brought into your approach to life and your interactions with others, at all levels. As an aside, there is also compelling evidence regarding the health benefits it has, such as on mood, stress, pain, distress, hypertension, weight management and many others (Rezek, 2010).

In essence, to be mindful and present can increase an individual's capacity to listen with intent, to pick up on nuances and subtleties of situations, gain perspective and evaluate situations with greater clarity. It allows one to declutter the mind and focus on the issue at hand rather than flip between past and future. To be actively involved in an experience but simultaneously be able to step outside of it and see it from both within and from outside is a very useful tool for leaders. It can assist in capturing the mood but not reacting to it which decreases stress, increases creative thinking and innovation, and provides the time and perspective to consider the most appropriate and effective response rather than react in a conditioned manner. This is a valuable and effective skill particularly when difficult and complex decisions are to be made.

Mindful leadership is not a patronising fad implying 'be calm, all will be fine'. The reality of our world is that all may not be fine. What mindfulness can do is develop a thinking, emotional and instinctual mind so that the leader can do the best for self, team and organisation.

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Dr Cheryl Rezek is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist who has worked across various fields of mental health for many years. She has combined clinical and academic work, headed a doctoral clinical psychology course specialist teaching unit, headed services, developed numerous treatment programmes and provided consultation, teaching and supervision to a broad set of professionals and organisations as well as lectured on an extensive range of topics to health professionals, commercial leaders and managers, and to the public. Her aim is to make psychological principles and mindfulness work accessible to a broad audience, from the general public to organisations, to leaders and decision-makers, in a straightforward and accessible manner. She authors work, consults and runs workshops. Her book *Life Happens: Waking up to yourself and your life in a mindful way* is a clear indication of how such concepts can be easily understood and utilised by a wider audience (www.lifehappens-mindfulness.com).

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