The Relevance of Mindfulness in Leadership Development

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Introduction

The growing interest in Mindfulness comes at a time when traditional thinking about leadership development is being questioned. In light of the many failures of leadership across all sectors over recent decades (economic, social, environmental, political, technological, military) the tried and trusted approaches have been revealed to be no longer fit for purpose. A new approach is urgently needed.

‘Leaders. For the last 100 or so years, we have studied their personality, intelligence, values, attitudes and even behavior. But seldom has anyone ventured physiologically inside of leaders.’

This paper explores how recent research into Mindfulness, and in particular the neuro-scientific findings, can offer a fresh perspective on developing leaders capable of effectively responding to the problems facing humanity.

‘The pursuit of mindful leadership will help you achieve clarity about what is important to you and a deeper understanding of the world around you. Mindfulness will help you clear away the trivia and needless worries about unimportant things, nurture passion for your work and compassion for others, and develop the ability to empower the people in your organization’

Future trends in leadership development

Much of the focus of leadership development in recent years has been on things that are visible - leadership competencies, skills and behaviours. These are all important aspects of leadership at a time when the pace, scale and depth of change is faster, bigger and deeper than ever before. But the global problems we are witnessing show they are not enough:


It is clear that the environment for leadership has changed – it is more complex, volatile and unpredictable. Therefore new leadership skills are required. A literature review on this subject summarises them as:

- Self-awareness
- Focus
- Adaptability

1 ‘Neuroscience and Leadership’ Richard Boyatzis, Ivey Business Journal 2011
2 Bill George, Professor of Management Practice, Harvard Business School, 2012
3 ‘Leading from the Emerging Future – from Ego System to Eco System Economies’ Scharmer and Kaufer 2013
These new skill sets point to a need to increase our ability to be aware and pay attention: to letting go of fixed positions and certainties; to increased flexibility of thought, word and behaviour; to greater depth and range of emotional intelligence and a realisation that we are always in relationship with everyone and everything around us, including ourselves.

Additionally it is now becoming clear that we have failed to distinguish between two different types of development – vertical and horizontal. Horizontal development is the development of new skills, abilities and behaviours and is, essentially, technical. Vertical development, in contrast, is about the stages that people progress through as they make sense of their world.

‘Horizontal development is like pouring water into an empty glass and the vessel fills up. Vertical development aims to expand the glass’

This growing interest in vertical leadership progression indicates a welcome change to the way leaders are developed and has manifested in what are seen by traditionalists to be new and radical initiatives such as ‘NeuroLeadership’ and ‘Conscious Leadership’. They can be summarised as creating:

‘The capacity to step outside of oneself, observe, see oneself in context, and have the power to choose what one wants to be and do next’

However, radical does not necessarily mean extreme – it can be defined as paying attention to the roots; and the roots of these approaches can be found in Buddhist Mindfulness practices. An appreciation of these along with some understanding of recent neuro-scientific research shows their relevance to helping leaders develop the new skill sets.

Mindfulness

Many definitions of Mindfulness abound, however I will use two that I consider are particularly relevant to leadership

‘A state of consciousness, one characterised by attention to present experience with a stance of open curiosity’

‘Present moment awareness’

Why is this important for leadership development? There are two themes that are prevalent in much of the literature about leadership – ability to learn from the past and ability to plan for the future. However, little is said about the need to pay attention to the ability to think in the present, the capacity to see what is actually going on now in contrast to what is planned for or expected.

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4 ‘Stages of Adult Development’ Bob Kegan
5 ‘Catching the Wave of Conscious Leadership’ Gina Hayden 2012
6 “Fully Present” – Susan Smalley and Diana Winston 2010
Additionally, a frequently unrecognised dimension of leadership is what is described as 'negative capability' - patience and the ability to tolerate frustration and anxiety.

'I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.

In numerous studies those who regularly practise mindfulness - the ability to maintain awareness and attention to the present moment and experience - have reported many benefits that I contend are relevant to the practice of leadership. They include:

- Enhanced focus & improved decision making
- Increased awareness of self and others
- Higher levels of resilience
- Strengthened cognitive effectiveness
- Improved performance
- Better ability to handle stress
- Improved well-being
- More creativity

What does science have to say about how this is possible?

**Neuro-plasticity – the self-forming brain**

'The sustainability of leadership effectiveness is directly a function of a person’s ability to adapt and activate neural plasticity'.

Until recently it was widely held that the brain developed during childhood until it reached a fixed state sometime around early adulthood. However, research over the last 25 years has revealed that the brain constantly rewires itself in response to our feelings, thoughts and experiences. This is known as 'neuro-plasticity' and reflected in what is now known as Hebbs Rule: ‘neurons that fire together wire together’.

'We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world'.

The good news for leaders is that with application and practice we are able to 're-wire' our brains to support our growth and well being in support of developing the new mindful leadership skills that are required. To use a computer analogy the ‘software’ – our thoughts and feelings – shape the ‘hardware’, the brain itself.

The bad news is that unless we take responsibility and focus on consciously re-wiring our brains the ‘software’ can change the ‘hardware’ for the worse as the neural pathways become entrenched. The more entrenched they become, the more they resist the process of rewiring.

'The more a sufferer concentrates on his symptoms, the deeper those symptoms are etched into his neural circuits. In the worst cases, the mind essentially trains itself to be sick'.

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7 The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats
8 'Neuroscience and Leadership' Richard Boyatzis, Ivey Business Journal 2011
9 Gautama Buddha
10 The Shallows – What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains' Nicholas Carr
In essence, if we find ourselves stuck in, for example, a highly autocratic style of leadership not only are we unlikely to be motivating and inspiring our followers, we are actively entrenching the behaviours into our neural pathways making it more likely we’ll continue to lead in this way.

**Benefits of Mindfulness for Leadership Development**

I’d now like to explore some of the evidenced benefits of Mindfulness that are particularly relevant for leaders.

1. **Enhanced focus, improved decision making, strengthened cognitive effectiveness**

   In a 2007 study\(^{11}\) it was discovered that people have two distinct ways of interacting with the world – a ‘default network’ which becomes active when not much else is happening and ‘direct experience’.

   The ‘default network’ holds together our narrative about ourselves, our history and future. When we experience the world using the narrative network we process and interpret the information through our ‘meaning-making’ filters and draw conclusions. There is nothing wrong with this as long as we are aware of it and don’t limit ourselves to experiencing the world just through this network.

   When the ‘direct experience’ network is activated several different regions of the brain become active that allow us to experience information coming into our senses in real time.

   So, when the narrative network is active we don’t see, hear or feel as much and we can become ‘lost in our thoughts’. However, when the direct experience network is active and we focus our attention on the data coming through our senses it reduces the narrative network activity.

   With awareness the narrative network can be useful, for example, in planning and strategising, whilst the direct experience network allows the leader to get closer to the current reality of any event and see what is happening more clearly. This enables greater flexibility of response, reduces the risk of being imprisoned by habits and patterns of thinking and allows the leader to respond in the present moment as events unfold.

   Noticing which network is active in each moment, choosing the most appropriate one to use, and then staying present to it sounds tricky.

   ‘Two birds in a tree; one eats the fruit whilst the other watches’\(^{12}\)

   How then can Mindfulness practice help leaders develop this capability?

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\(^{11}\) *Mindfulness Meditation and Distinct Neural Modes of Self-Reference* Norman Farb, University of Toronto

\(^{12}\) *The Mundaka Upanishad*
Mindfulness is a particular way of attending to present experience with openness and curiosity and has been shown to include both what has been called ‘focused attention’ and ‘open monitoring’.

Focused attention involves deliberately focusing attention on a neutral point of awareness – like the breath – and then whenever the mind starts to wander acknowledging this and gently returning the attention to the neutral focus. This helps the mind to settle and reduces distractions.

Open monitoring – also referred to as ‘choiceless awareness’ - notices whatever comes into the one’s field of awareness. This helps one become aware of experiences in each moment and recognise mental and emotional habits.

‘We see emerging evidence from the science evidence that mindfulness meditation training increases attention and that focused attention training increases mindfulness’ 📚

The ability to focus effectively in order to make considered decisions is therefore an essential requirement for leaders:

‘Those who focus best are relatively immune to emotional turbulence, more able to stay unflappable in a crisis and to keep an even keel despite life’s emotional waves’ 📚

2. Increased awareness of self and others

An essential aspect of leadership is the ability to manage our thoughts and emotions: leaders who are not able to do so have been labeled as ‘toxic’ in that they pollute the system around them:

‘Leadership is a poison except to the one who possesses the antidote in his heart’ 📚

When one considers the theory of ‘emotional contagion’ this has serious implications for leaders. Recent studies show that the ‘firing’ of the limbic system occurs within 8 milliseconds of initial cognition and that it takes 40 milliseconds for the secondary cognition to appear in the neo cortex for interpretation. As research suggests that negative emotions are stronger than positive emotions, our unconscious emotional states are triggering emotions in others before we or they know it. As a result leaders who are not mindful are seriously at risk of infecting others with negative emotions.

Leaders bear a solemn responsibility for knowing what they are feeling and thinking so as to be able to make a mindful choice.

‘Being able to change your internal state might be one of the most powerful techniques you learn in becoming an effective leader– one who inspires others to learn, adapt and perform at their best.’ 📚

3. Higher levels of resilience, better ability to handle stress and improved well-being

13 ‘Fully Present’ – Susan Smalley and Diana Winston 2010
14 ‘Focus - The Hidden Driver of Excellence’ Daniel Goleman 2013
15 ‘Mevlana Jalalu’ddin Rumi
Many recent studies in the business world have shown that leaders are particularly susceptible to stress and many report a diminishing sense of health and well-being. 88% of leaders polled in a recent survey said that work is a primary stress in their lives and having a leadership role increases the level of stress. 86% said they would benefit from having more training in how to manage it. Stress in the workplace has been estimated to cost businesses on average £2000 per employee every year.

Mindfulness has been shown to have a significant positive impact on health, well-being and resilience in general. A recent study\(^\text{16}\) summarised these as:

- 70 per cent reduction in anxiety
- Fewer visits to their GP
- Improvements to the immune system
- Longer and better quality sleep
- A reduction in negative feelings like anger, tension and depression
- Improvements in physical conditions, e.g. chronic fatigue syndrome.

**Summary**

It is important that future leadership development is focused on creating leaders who are capable of leading in a world that has been described as increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Many recent scientific studies have shown that Mindfulness practice can provide both a solid foundation for leadership development as well as an on-going process that if incorporated into their daily routine will enable leaders to respond to modern day leadership challenges. The key word however is **practice**.

‘The Dalai Lama and all spiritual masters realise that, just like learning to play tennis, golf, or any sport, the quickest way to improve is through training. Training is a key part of all major spiritual disciplines’.\(^{19}\)

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\(^{17}\) Centre for Creative Leadership Research paper 2009  
\(^{18}\) The UK Mental Health Foundation 2011  
\(^{19}\) ‘Why Meditate ... and Why Now?’ Mark Thornton,