

# Research Corner



## Creating Mindful Leaders and Organizations

By Joshua Ehrlich

**F**eeling intense market pressure, businesses are taking on more and more. Add our accelerating technology and culture, and we see employees working harder and paying attention less. The cost is our ability to lead, innovate, and live meaningful lives (Bruch and Menges, 2010).

It's not just that we have more information coming at us. We interrupt ourselves almost as often as others interrupt us (Mark, 2015). Most people say they check email constantly at work. Why? Checking email stimulates

the same brain pathways as addiction (Cooper, 2014). We are addicted to distraction. And the less we pay attention, the harder it becomes to pay attention (Bradberry, 2015).

We think we can multitask, but the truth is our prefrontal cortex can only focus on one task at a time. We end up going 40 percent slower and making twice as many mistakes (APA, 2015). Multitasking lowers our IQ up to 15 points, and over time can reduce brain density in areas related to self-control (Loh and Ryota, 2014).

Multitasking also impairs our emotional intelligence because we are focused away from the social cues that help us make good decisions. I see leaders so busy they can't empathize with their direct reports, take time to focus, reflect, or plan.

### **Mindful Leadership**

Mindfulness is present, open, and engaged attention. When you pay active attention, you build self-awareness, which is the heart of leadership. You can think of awareness like a spotlight.

Instead of waving it around, mindfulness enables you to focus your spotlight where you want. You can then turn the light back on yourself and reflect. You need experiences to learn, but without support and reflection, experience can be a lousy teacher.

Mindfulness is a terrific leadership and learning tool because it gives you access to information. Scanning your internal and external environment provides clues to your reactions and impact on others. Mindfulness gives you a way to learn from the inside out by being intentionally curious. Most exercises start with paying attention to a single object or experience, and when your attention wanders, simply bringing your attention back. Mindful breathing, walking, eating, and listening are all excellent exercises (Hanh, 1992).

### Experiencing Mindfulness

Try this simple exercise to experience mindfulness. 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 is powerful. When your mind wanders, smile to yourself and bring your attention back to your breathing. The smile is important. Mindfulness is not just being concentrated in the present. It is an attitude of openness or acceptance towards yourself and your experience.

A common misconception about this exercise (also known as meditation) is that it is about stopping your thinking. You cannot stop thinking, and trying to do so is counterproductive. You can, however, learn to focus your attention elsewhere. You can practice mindfulness at any time, when walking (notice the feeling of your feet as you make each step), eating (feel how the food feels in your mouth and stomach), and in meetings (scan the reactions of those around you). All that is required for mindfulness practice is that you actively pay attention to what is going on.

Often associated with Buddhism, mindfulness has become the subject of a substantial amount of research

(Sedlmeier et al., 2012). Over a dozen Fortune 500 organizations are teaching mindfulness to employees and it is also being taught by the U.S. Army and in public schools and MBA programs. Companies are finding significant benefits, including improved focus, decision-making, creativity, and learning; increased communication, collaboration, and productivity; enriched emotional intelligence, well-being, and client relationships; higher job satisfaction and engagement. At the same time companies also see reduced employee stress, absenteeism, and turnover (Schaufenbuel, 2014).

The tantalizing prospect is for leaders to create mindful organizations—true high-performance cultures that support clear thinking and effectiveness.

The outcome research on mindfulness suggests six ways leaders can reap the benefits of mindfulness: (1) spirit—being clear on your values and purpose gives you a compass to guide you through complexity; (2) emotion—staying with your feelings, you can access the information they contain and can avoid reacting to them; (3) mind—noticing thoughts without being hooked by them, you get clear and make better decisions; (4) body—attending to your body, you

relax and take care of yourself better; (5) connecting—tuning in to relationships, you listen and build trust; and (6) inspiring—having a vision, you lead with passion.

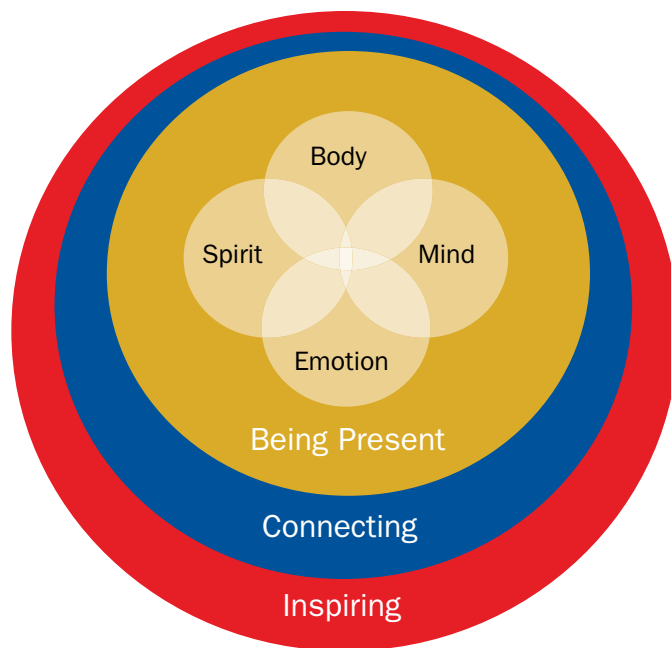
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I created a model to show how spirit, emotion, mind, body, connecting, and inspiring are linked and support each other (see Figure 1) (Ehrlich, 2015). The core of the model is connecting with yourself—with your spirit, emotion, mind, and body. Once you can show up completely with all these aspects of yourself, you can connect with others and build relationships. Once you have connected, you can lead and inspire.

### Mindful Leadership Applications

The first task in creating a team is to figure out where you are going. Then

Mindful Leadership Model



your challenge is focusing everyone's attention on achieving that shared goal. But to really engage employees requires understanding each individual's values, purpose, and vision. How do these align with where you see the team going? If they do not align, can you or they be open to change?

A common trap in organizations is the overemphasis on outcomes. Just because the numbers look good does not mean the customer is happy or the business is healthy. Leading mindfully helps us get better results by focusing on process—how we are getting to outcomes. We can help balance process and outcomes by teaching our teams to reflect. When your team can self-correct you are freed up.

Constant change and uncertainty makes it very hard for leaders to feel confident in themselves and their decisions. Mindfulness is an intrinsic way for leaders to feel good about themselves. Rather than measuring themselves against uncontrollable external yardsticks (pay, promotion, and approval), they can build a stable sense of confidence by cultivating self-acceptance. They can feel good about themselves because they are in sync with their values and purpose, can face reality, and can treat themselves with kindness instead of self-criticism.

Most professionals are promoted because they are technically strong and good at getting things done. As they move up the ladder, though, they need to shift their attention from what made them successful (doing) to what will make them successful (leading). They can move from task analysis (how do you best do something?) to market analysis (what business should you be in?). And they can move from self-development (how do you get better?) to coaching and team development (how do you make others better?). Making these kinds of "mindshifts" depends on leaders changing where they focus, what they value, and how they measure success (Ehrlich, 2012).

## Mindful Organizations

Teaching leaders to practice mindfulness is not enough. We need to create

teams and cultures that support them.

We can make the business case for change by showing the multibillion dollar cost of absenteeism (I am home sick), presenteeism (I am here, but I am not really present), and poor decision-making (pick your favorite corporate scandal) (Grey, 2015). We can also showcase positive success stories from state-of-the-art wellness programs, like Johnson & Johnson saving \$250 million on health care costs, and Towers Watson finding 34 percent higher revenue per participating employee (Berry, 2010; Carver, et al., 2015).

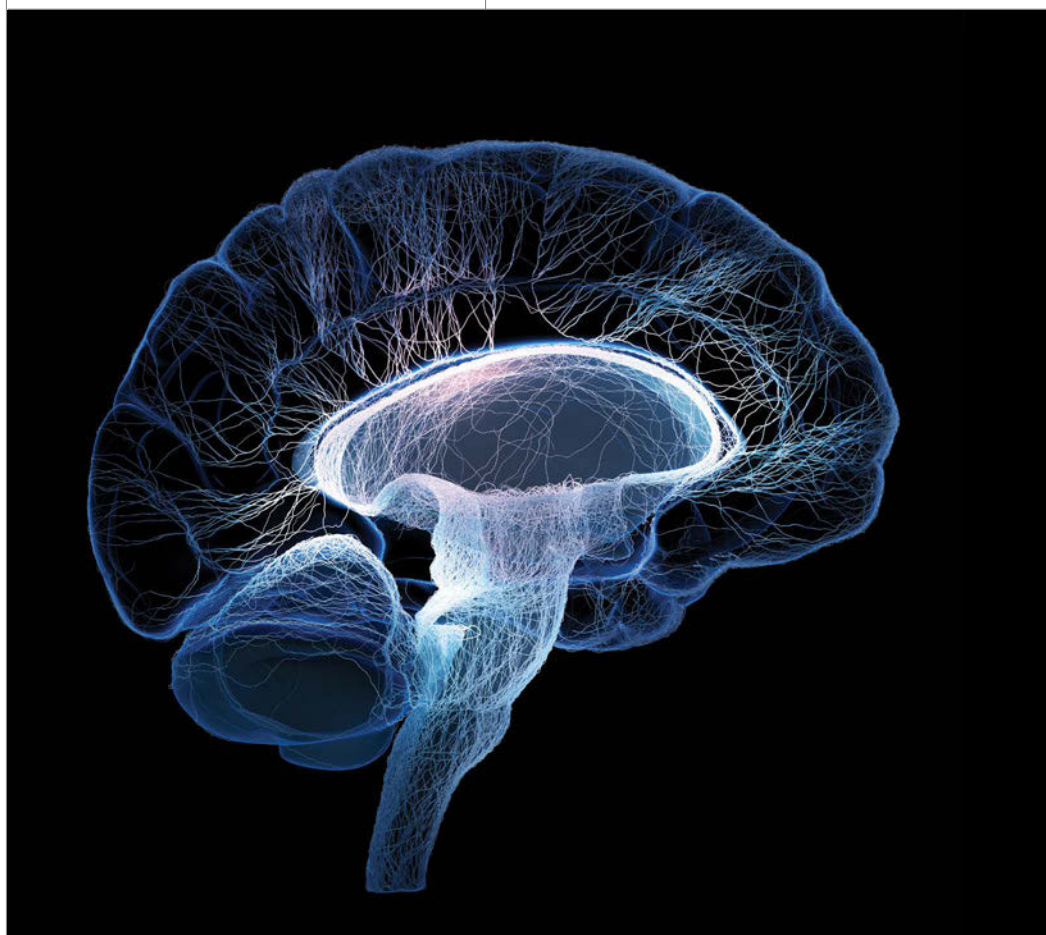
One of my clients committed to more than 200 key strategic initiatives in 2013. They soon realized employees were disengaging and it was impossible to execute. They now have a more disciplined goal-setting process and make sure objectives are clear and achievable. Focusing on doing just a few things, and doing them well, gets us out of the acceleration trap.

We can change our meeting culture and end the tyranny of back-to-

back meetings. Another of my clients, Diageo, has made 45-minute meetings the new norm. The same work is now getting done in less time, and people have time to think between meetings. Do we need to plunge into tactics as soon as we sit down, or can we take a minute to clear the decks first? One CEO I work with starts every executive committee meeting with a minute of silence. He gets better communication, collaboration, and decision-making from his team.

Just because email is instantaneous doesn't mean it needs an instantaneous response. Think about establishing expectations that make sense for your business. Perhaps 24 hours is fast enough. If you have a crisis you can always pick up the phone. Teams can agree on times ("free thinking Fridays") for no email or formal meetings. It is not possible nor productive to have people chained to their email 24/7.

Compensation and performance management programs typically focus on external outcomes over intrinsic processes. One to five rating systems



assume we can compress all of a person's effort, growth, and performance into a single number. It's no wonder that, especially when done on a bell curve, this just makes employees feel bad. How can we reinforce the motivation to learn and improve our process instead? Companies like GAP

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and Deloitte are shifting to narrative ratings and teaching managers to give ongoing feedback to change this dynamic (Buckingham & Goodall, 2015).

Open workspaces foster collaboration at the expense of concentration. But if everyone is wearing headphones to block out the noise, do we even get collaboration? We can make sure we have enough quiet rooms and refuge spaces that are free from distractions. And we can invest in building designs that incorporate natural sounds and forms, and give us sight lines to the outside, thus restoring our attention and making us more productive (Ryan, et al, 2014).

Senior leaders can institute programs from the top and model healthy work-life habits. But the most successful culture change initiatives incorporate bottom up approaches. Employees are leading weekly mindfulness sessions and getting tremendous traction in a number of companies, with thousands of employees dialing in from around the world.

### Getting Closer to Reality

The enthusiasm for mindfulness has raised some concerns. It is fair to ask if meditation can cause harm if not practiced under the guidance of an experienced teacher. However, the anecdotal reports of negative impact are small (Rocha, 2014). Another potential issue is using meditation to retreat from difficult problems (Bren-

del, 2015). We can certainly "bliss out" during meditation instead of following the original intention of getting closer to reality.

Mindful leadership provides a framework, toolkit, and pathway forward, but it is not a panacea. More research is needed to understand how mindfulness works. Studies consistently show it has benefits that go beyond relaxation techniques, visualization, and cognitive training, but we don't know why. As we look for answers we can continue to experiment, both in organizations and the laboratory. There is much to be gained from applying mindfulness to our lives and work. The alternative is to continue speeding up and losing ourselves, along with what makes us effective and what makes life meaningful.

Mindful organizations can bring out our best, supporting us fully in spirit, mind, body, and emotion. Mindful leaders can make businesses grow by creating lasting relationships with customers and employees. Mindful employees can do work they are passionate about with teams they care about. By refocusing, we can transform our workplaces. ■■

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