

How does mindfulness improve leadership and what impact could it have on Australian workplaces?

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Introduction

Mindfulness is a mode of consciousness marked by a commitment to purposeful present moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn 1994). Practices of mindfulness have been utilised for thousands of years as part of Buddhism, but the last two or three decades have also seen widespread adoption and research of mindfulness in clinical settings: to help people cope with depression and pain among other conditions.

This article focuses on the application of mindfulness in work environments and in leadership – an area that has been much less widely documented. How might mindful practices improve leadership and in turn, benefit the culture and productivity of workplaces? In what follows, I summarise some key research findings about outcomes of mindfulness (see for example (Allen, Chambers et al. 2006; Shapiro, Carlson et al. 2006; Hözel, Lazar et al. 2011)). In addition however, and on the basis of teaching, research and leadership development with my colleague Richard Searle, this article describes our observations and the feedback we get from people about how ideas of mindfulness change their leadership and lives. While many of us with a strong research or academic orientation are persuaded by the scientific evidence – the controlled trials that involve interventions and measured follow ups that show the impact of mindfulness on outcomes – often Buddhists maintain that one should only change one's approach on the basis of personal experience and testing. I admit to putting myself in the latter camp and I know that I, and others, are very deeply moved by and inspired to change ourselves, from the direct personal accounts of others.

Further though, experience of leadership suggests it that it is rarely rational empirical evidence that persuades people to do new, important and valuable things. As leadership researchers we see how, time and time again, individuals trying to mobilise change through presentation of the 'business case' fail. They are circumvented by political allegiances, vested interests, cynicism, paralysis, intellectualisation and a host of other familiar defenses. What does sometimes open new insights and new possibilities for others is a leader's capacity to be present to current reality and courageous enough to name and advocate for what matters (His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Van den Muyzenberg 2008; (Carroll 2007)).

In this article, I suggest that regular practices of mindfulness give leaders a different perspective on their world, opening them up to ways of being which are both more focused on what matters and more observant and appreciative of what is there. Paradoxically, becoming more present enables leaders to see reality more clearly and act more purposefully and with less of their own stuff getting in the way (Senge, Scharmer et al. 2004; Sinclair 2007). This is one of a number of paradoxes which we often see operating in mindful leadership: to open up for change, it is necessary to sometimes stop striving to change things; to empower others, stop talking and listen from a different place; to go forward effectively, notice the present; to achieve things, stop doing and start being.

Mindfulness

The first accounts of the principles of mindfulness date back to the Buddha's writings over two thousand years ago. Still, today, the purest and simplest accounts of what it is like to be mindful come from the writings of those trained in Buddhism such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (Hanh 1999).

Since the later decades of the twentieth century, mindfulness has been more widely researched and its benefits documented in a range of clinical and non-clinical settings. Psychologist Ellen Langer was a pioneer in experimentation of the benefits of mindfulness in old age, documenting that regular mindful practices helped delay and reverse mental and physical symptoms of ageing (Langer 1989; Langer 1992). Langer did, however, adopt a very specific definition of mindfulness which referred to the cognitive capacities to categorise familiar stimuli in new ways and to elaborate new categories of thought.

For our purposes it is important to make clear that mindfulness is not just another category of thinking. Rather it denotes a state of attuned awareness of, and in, the present moment that is **not** cluttered by thought. Mindfulness is often associated with 'not-thinking' or a state where one is undistracted by the busy-ness of constantly thinking. Medical academic Craig Hassed has indeed suggested that a condition of excessive thinking is one of the key causes of stress in contemporary life (Hassed 2003). He and others have noted that we have an over-reliance on thinking which does us harm and that mindfulness provides a very different mode of consciousness.

There is a further, related risk in much contemporary research that equates the mind with the brain. In these accounts, mindfulness is sometimes treated as an artefact of superior brain functioning. However we would argue that this is a predictable trap for western trained researchers with their biases reproducing the dominance of the brain. In many traditional accounts the mind's operations are not located just, or even at all, in the brain. There is some support for the idea that neural-like structures are much more widely distributed in the body – the sources perhaps of other kinds of intelligence, such as intuition. At the very least the mind is not circumscribed by the brain. Accordingly, a better way to understand mindfulness is not to define it but to experience it: to encourage people to go straight to the experience, where the stream of reactive thought is observed the mind is focused on present sensations, such as the breath or a bodily sensation.

Research about how mindfulness changes people/leaders

Studies have documented that regular mindfulness practice elicits better attentional capabilities and more positive emotional states, mediated through neuroplastic changes in key parts of the brain involved in cognitive and emotional functioning. In an article hypothesising both the mechanisms by which mindfulness works and reviewing the evidence about benefits, Shapiro et.al. summarise that mindfulness changes our intentions (making us better at self-regulation and more compassionate toward self and others); changes our attentional capacities enabling us to sustain attention for longer, switch attention more deftly when needed and inhibit unnecessary secondary processing; and finally mindfulness changes affect, enhancing positive emotions (see Fig 1) (Brown and Ryan 2003; Shapiro, Carlson et al. 2006; Brown, Ryan et al. 2007; van den Hurk, Gionni et al. 2010; van den Hurk, Janssen et al. 2010; Hölzel, Lazar et al. 2011).

Each of these three effects of mindfulness on intention; attention and emotion or affect; has been subject to further study. Though mostly undertaken in clinical and laboratory settings rather than field studies, an increasing number seek to observe effects of mindfulness and its contrary states, such as decision-making under stress and multi-tasking, in workplaces and leadership contexts.

Some of the research described here is also interested in tracking the neurological changes- the chemical and physiological changes in neural structures - that accompany mindfulness and mediate its effects on behaviour and attitude. While this is a burgeoning area of research and there is clear evidence that mindfulness does elicit neuroplastic changes (see the interest in 'neuroleadership' for example), my particular interest is on the experienced and observed outcomes for leaders and organisations.

A substantial group of researchers have focused on the attentional benefits of mindfulness practices (van den Hurk, Gionmi et al. 2010). Many of us find it hard to focus our attention on one thing. For example in a typical meeting, our minds are thinking about lunch and the weekend and whether that remark 10 minutes ago by the CEO should be taken personally, despite our efforts to focus on an issue being discussed. Mindfulness trains people to increase their capacity to pay attention (beyond the 3-7 seconds that is normal) and to develop different qualities of attention for different situations. For example, consciousness researcher B. Allan Wallace has differentiated: qualities of attentional ease (an open relaxed noticing); attentional stability (being able to sustain focused attention); and attentional vividness (being awake and energised to what's there). The capacity to give different qualities of attention to different aspects of context is highly relevant for leaders who often face multiple competing demands on their attention. What often occurs in response are patterns of hypervigilance – giving everything a high level of suspicious attention – and patterns of distraction – moving between many different issues of varying importance. In their research on the costs of multi-tasking, Dean and Webb find that such habits of hovering poor quality attention on multiple issues simultaneously reduces efficiency not enhances it (Dean and Webb 2011). They also note that while multitasking is an often lionised norm in workplaces, it reduces job satisfaction, feelings of health and well-being, while increasing feelings of stress and anxiety (despite or perhaps because it is addictive), and it results in lower productivity.

A range of other studies focus on the emotional benefits of regular mindfulness practice. Weinstein et.al. found that mindfulness changed habits of stress attribution, improving coping and emotional well-being (Weinstein, Brown et al. 2009). Another by Van den Hurk et.al. found evidence of reduced reactivity following regular practice of mindfulness (van den Hurk, Janssen et al. 2010).

Other researchers have been particularly interested in the quality of cognitive processing such as capacities to take perspective, embrace unexpected data and make ethical decisions. For some of these psychological researchers, mindfulness is seen as a metacognitive skill involving thinking about one's habits of thinking. Reudy and Schweitzer argue that unethical decisions often stem from a lack of awareness (Reudy and Schweitzer 2010). In two separate but related studies, these researchers found that low mindfulness was associated with the presence of self-serving cognitive justifications, self-deception and unconscious biases, in turn supporting unethical conduct such as cheating. In contrast were those who rated high on mindfulness and were more likely to uphold ethical standards and adopt a principled approach to decision-making .

Finally, a group of researchers many of whom are part of the positive psychology movement have documented the ways in which mindfulness mediates feelings of happiness, gratitude, joy and compassion for others. These studies generally show a correlation between mindful practices and feelings of personal well being, capacity to manage stress and to have a positive, appreciative outlook on life which is less subject to the ups and downs of events. Some studies have shown related improvements in health and immune system functioning (Davidson, Kabat-Zinn et al. 2003).

Evidence from Leader's lives, work and workplaces: what happens?

For about 8 years, Richard Searle and I with colleagues at Melbourne Business School have been incorporating mindfulness practices and ideas into the work we do with leaders. This work ranges from running 4 day Mindful Leadership programs, where we do a lot of experiential work encouraging mindfulness through yoga, meditation and insight dialogue, through to more mainstream leadership programs such as Leadership for Strategic Success and MBA Leadership subjects, where mindfulness is just a small part of a bigger offering. We have also worked with individuals and leadership teams on aspects of mindfulness, including introducing theory, doing exercises, for example in listening, dialogue and meditation.

Leaders in all spheres are facing what seem to be increased pressures to do more with fewer resources. They have workloads they never feel on top of, and are sometimes charged with letting go of good people or doing very difficult things. Many feel they are on the edge, close to breaking. They can't see another way forward but more of the same, though they fantasise about escape. Sometimes their personal relationships are under intense strain. Relations with family and friends, as well as health, are the casualties of staying later at night or yet one more international or interstate trip. Leaders lose sight of the pleasure and satisfaction they may have gained from work, instead feeling ground down. When we together explore some of the pressures they are under, and some of these effects, their first response can be 'But that's just leadership isn't it? That's the job?'

Among the reasons why many of these leaders seem to find mindfulness useful is that they can, very directly in a workshop setting or even better, over a couple of days, get an experience of being quieter and stiller, despite the chaos. Even briefly, this experience of observing their thoughts about the situation rather than being captured in them, opens up an option that wasn't there before: that they can choose their reaction. Seemingly simple but also profound, in the short term there may be no change to what's happening to us or around us. Mindfulness simply allows us to be with those happenings in a less reactive way.

In some cases, as in a large multi-campus hospital with which I was working, there was already a lot known about and being done with mindfulness, especially in areas of palliative care. In another couple of examples of working with P-12 school leadership teams, mindfulness was something that students and parents had been introduced to as part of staying healthy and coping with pressure. In one school, many teachers had already been trained to work with mindfulness with the class groups, drawing on a range of programs and exercises tailored to the year level of their students. My role was to show how mindfulness was not just a very useful tool to help with stress but could make a central contribution to school leadership and in growing empowering school cultures (which most schools are also very keen to embed). In their educational settings, teachers are often more used to

talking than listening, and they are expected to give advice and problem-solve. Teachers already know that the most sustainable solutions for students are usually the ones they come up with for themselves when supported to do so. Mindful leadership puts a central value on being present with others. For many of these teachers, mindfulness helps them find a different and deeper place from which to listen to students: one that doesn't necessarily take more time but creates a space in which students feel held to find a new path themselves.

I have explored mindful leadership with a diversity of other groups – from senior international police officers, through to women in leadership programs, groups of young community leaders, corporate executives, librarians, academics, unionists – with ostensibly different and very serious leadership challenges. Senior police officers experience excessive workloads, issues such as people trafficking and organised crime where the stakes are high. There are lots of things which pull them away from their core work of mobilising their staff to keep on tackling very difficult challenges where solutions are scarce. They found that mindfulness helped them reconnect with and re-validate some of the strengths and skills that they had often developed early in career: to bring a highly focused yet open attention to the phenomena which they are seeking to address. What we almost invariably find is that ideas of mindfulness and the glimpses of getting stiller or listening more deeply, resonate powerfully with these groups. Many identify mindfulness or meditation as the thing they want to explore more fully – and many go on to do so because they tell us!

Associated with mindfulness and its reduced reactivity, is the possibility of letting go of some things (see Richard Searle's 'Mindfulness and Letting Go'). Many leaders carry around in their heads ideas like 'I can't let them down' or 'it's my job to do those difficult things'. Frequently these are punitive ideas or beliefs which are actually not functional or useful any more. In letting go of them, leaders often find they are of more use to the people around them because their interactions are not overshadowed by these 'shoulds'.

A beautiful quality that sometimes unfolds with groups experimenting with mindfulness is an appreciativeness. Whether it's in newly-formed groups of strangers or intact leadership teams, the processes of slowing down and listening more fully and deeply means that people hear things from others that they would ordinarily miss. As the research has shown, mindfulness helps people notice and step back from default responses such as biases and stereotypes. I've seen management teams 'see' one of their members as if meeting a new person with a whole range of previously overlooked contributions. I've also seen people share profound things about themselves with others who are pretty well strangers, a process which often ushers in for both parties a deep appreciation of the common humanity, and common experiences, binding us all.

Further, leaders often tell us that an impact of mindfulness is a reconnection with family. Kids notice that they've got their dad's attention in a way they've got used to not having. Kids remark that their parents are smiling more, get home earlier and listen to them. Often participants will sign up to do some classes on meditation, yoga or pilates with their partner. For me this is often one of the most satisfying pieces of feedback about the impact of mindfulness. As a facilitator of these processes, there is sometimes a very quiet, almost stunned air about groups working on mindfulness. It is as if they are remembering or reconnecting with a way of being that they'd lost sight of but have now glimpsed and feel they can retrieve.

Where workplaces contain mindful practices, such as pausing to allow deeper and more reflective dialogue among group members, some important changes seem to occur. People feel more respected and listened to. People are supported to look after themselves, to set boundaries and negotiate ways of looking after themselves, whether it's working from home sometimes, turning blackberries off on weekends, or regularly leaving work early or starting late. When employees see leaders doing this, it usually gives them permission for themselves. A result is that people enjoy work more, with lower rates of turnover and stress-related absenteeism.

Further, there is often a sense of common engagement around purpose. This is not the situation where the 'vision statement' is handed down as an edict from on high. Purpose is collectively revisited and refined: what matters to us here? How are we trying to make a difference? In a case of a private company we know about, this collective and mindful engagement with purpose results not only in fulfilled employees and an active philanthropic program but on business metrics as well, such as the quality of client relationships and amounts invested by those clients.

While many of the observations above are based on our anecdotal experience, there is an increasing amount of leadership research which also documents the impact on work and workplaces of leaders who demonstrate some of the mindful qualities we've explored here. These include the impacts of leaders who are able to gain perspective on and intervene purposefully in the action (see for example (Heifetz 1994; Heifetz and Linsky 2002); leaders who by being wholly present make different possibilities available to those around them (Senge, Scharmer et al. 2004; Scharmer 2009); and leaders who can focus their attention on what matters, initiating difficult but powerful dialogue (Isaacs 1999).

Conclusion

While leadership is a field characterised by fads and fulsome promises, mindfulness is an ancient idea. It has stood the test of time. As researchers and teachers interested in mindfulness we simply have the privilege of passing on simple practices that have been refined by far more accomplished others.

However, our work in leadership research and development also brings us face to face with leaders and their experiences. Many are truly inspirational but it's also true that most are also struggling – to do their work effectively and purposefully with grace and intent but with less mental and physical costs to themselves and the people working alongside them. You could say that there is an epidemic of suffering out in many Australian workplaces. Our view is that can be changed and it may be that it can be changed through a commitment to some quite simple acts: being present and paying attention to what's really happening; being connected to others and appreciative of their efforts, being reflective about our own stuff and letting go of some of the ebbs and flows of ego.

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Findings from empirical studies eg Brown & Ryan (2003), Brown et.al (2007), Shapiro et.al (2006)
Holzel et.al (2011)

