

Mindful Leadership – What is it? How can I apply it to my programs and projects? ^{1, 2}

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ABSTRACT

It’s a typical day. You get-up, read the news, listen to the TV or radio, rush to get out of the house for your busy day at work. Traffic is a snarl all the way into work. As you travel, you are listening to the radio or a book to try and relax before work. Once you get into work, there are emails awaiting your review and response, people are stopping at your door to ask questions or just wanting to chat, you have more meetings than work hours, and multiple tasks that need to be completed right now. You do not have time to think or prepare. All you want to do is, STOP! Have you felt this way? What can you do?

This paper reviews the benefits of being a mindful leader. It discusses how mindfulness helps you focus, cultivate being present (an external awareness) and the ability to pause (an internal awareness). Being focused helps leaders minimize multitasking and pay attention to what is important. Being present allows leaders to observe what is going on around them and actively listen to what is being said, so they can separate our self from a situation and reflect, thus allowing our inner knowledge to emerge. When we pause we create space, so we can learn to respond and reframe a story instead of reacting in stressful situations. In addition, managers who demonstrate and encourage the practice of mindfulness create an engaging and interactive team environment.

MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

Have you found yourself focusing on a meeting you had yesterday and what you could have done better or how the team could have reached a better solution? Or maybe you find yourself worrying about tomorrow and what could go wrong even when you have planned for various

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contingencies. This reflection is often not about learning and growing but about judging yourself and your abilities as a leader. Mindfulness is defined as the practice of being present or being aware of your current situation, your emotions, and how you are feeling at any given time and in any given situation without judgement. Mindfulness helps you focus on the tasks you need to accomplish right now so you can manage your project through all phases from initiation through closure. Mindfulness also helps you be present and aware of what you can accomplish in this moment and acknowledge what is within your limits and current control.

Forbes defines leadership as “a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others towards the achievement of a goalⁱ.” Great leaders exhibit characteristics such as: being focused, direct, clear in how they respond, creative, trustworthy, engaging, reliable, humble, understanding, self-aware, grounded, etc. A mindful leader is “someone who embodies a leadership presence by cultivating focus, clarity, creativity, and compassion in the service of others.ⁱⁱ” Great leaders are mindful leaders.

Having a mindfulness practice helps you focus, cultivate presence (an external awareness) and the ability to pause (an internal awareness). Frequently our minds wander; we tune-out when we need to **focus**. How many times have we reached the end of an hour and wondered, “What have I spent my time on?”, “What have I accomplished?” Maybe you get distracted by emails, news bulletins, comments from others, or pop-ups on your phone. Many consider these activities multitasking. Multitasking is defined as the ability to perform multiple tasks at the same time. Earl Miller, a professor of neuroscience at MIT, shows that people appear to handle more than one task at a time, yet he or she actually switches between the tasks very rapidly. This rapid-fire switching is a distraction that decreases productivity, causes mistakes, and limits creativityⁱⁱⁱ. The lack of attention to a given task results in the task taking longer to complete and being more prone to errors^{iv}. Dr. Miller recommends the following steps to counter multitasking and help you focus: block out periods of time to focus and eliminate as many distractions as possible such as putting away your smartphone, turning off extra screens, and shutting down your email. If all else fails, take short breaks and move around. Through a practice of mindfulness, you begin to learn how to let those distractions go and decide how you want to focus your time and attention to detail, so you can cultivate presence and the ability to pause.

Presence is the ability to observe what is around us, so we can separate our self from a situation to contemplate and reflect, thus allowing our inner knowledge to emerge^v. This awareness includes our understanding of the current situation, our frames, and our emotions and feelings. Frames are defined as mental models that we use to help make sense of the world around us^{vi}. Presence helps a leader become aware of her core assumptions, so she can delay offering her understanding of a situation and not limit her team in contributing advice, ideas, and solutions. Presence also takes us from having a binary frame of reference or “believing we know what is going on” to an open frame of reference that actively seeks other possibilities thus observing and questioning a situation to challenge our core assumptions. A leader who has a binary frame of reference or is closed-minded only sees or contemplates two outcomes: a situation is either black or white, she is either right or wrong, or the answer is either this or that. Whereas, an

open-mind leader can see many solutions to a situation, many options to an issue, and many answers to a question. As a productive project manager, you may be called upon to help mediate disputes or help a group come to reasonable next steps in your project. By cultivating an open-mind and being aware of our frames, we allow our self the space to acknowledge our biases and positions, so we can actively observe what is happening around us.

Observation is the noticing of details without judgment. When we actively observe a situation, we notice what people are saying, their body language, and the emotional current of the room. We observe the body language of our team to see if it matches the words being stated. We notice which team members have open postures – or are taking up a lot of physical space, which shows that they are actively involved in the process. Typically, open postures are when the torso is leaning toward others, their arms are at or away from their side, and their chest, abdomen, and lower extremities are easily seen. Whereas, in a closed posture the person is taking up as little space as possible to protect their most vulnerable body parts. Their shoulders may be rounded and elevated by their ears, their arms may cover their chest, and their legs may be crossed. A person showing a closed posture may be demonstrating that he or she is feeling threatened, so upon noticing this the project manager could make the environment safe so that the person can contribute to the project. Having an open-mind also allows a project manager to set-aside his position or current understanding, and **actively listen** and consider what is being said. Active listening is when the listener fully concentrates, understands, responds, and remembers what is being said so he can repeat the intent of what the speaker said, instead of listening to prepare counter arguments. Active observation and listening allows a leader to evaluate the mood of the team and understand the discussions, which leads to identifying a common ground, which then enables the team to come up with solutions that are best for the project and the sponsor. In addition to using mindfulness to understand your team and the situation, it helps you become more self-aware.

By adding a **pause** or silence to being present, a leader gets space to learn more about herself, so she can embrace curiosity and become open to hearing other points-of-view and accepting other solutions. The pause allows her to check-in with herself and identify her reactions, so she can choose how to respond. The pause also allows her to reframe her stories. Let's look at these concepts more.

Mindfulness helps you become a better leader by giving you space to decide how to respond to a situation instead of reacting to it^{vii}. Using a physical act, such as focusing on your breath, the sensation of your toe pressing into the floor, or physically moving yourself away from the table, can give you space and time to separate yourself from a situation. When a leader is not aware of his feelings and he experiences stress, his fight-or-flight instincts take over and he reacts to the stressful situation. By using the pause to **check-in** with himself and acknowledge his feelings and emotions, physical reactions, and maybe identifying what triggered his emotions, he gets space to break that fight-or-flight reaction so he can choose how to respond. By cultivating space, a leader gains the ability to consider his response and the possible outcomes and consequence of his response. By pausing, he also becomes more grounded as a leader, so he can

choose how to respond. This act of self-awareness gives him time to consider what is the best response. For example, if a person is yelling at you, her face may be red and arms flailing. If you do not realize that you are feeling threatened and attacked, you would probably react by yelling back and escalating the interaction. However, by pausing to check-in and assess your feelings and your physical reactions, you gain the space and insight to decide what is the best way to respond. By acknowledging your emotional state, you can ask questions to get a better understanding of why she is yelling and maybe the use of this space will lead to a better outcome.

Another benefit of a mindfulness practice that helps you be a better leader is the ability to **reframe a story**. Take a moment and think back on an unfavorable interaction you've had, mindfulness helps you consider both the facts and the context of the story related to that interaction. For example, let's consider what it means to reframe the following story, where Sally is a fictitious project manager.

When Sally was assigned as a project manager to facilitate the standardization of a business process among five different working groups within her organization, she faced many challenges to get these groups to come to consensus on a new standardized business process.

For over 20 years, each group had developed its own way of performing this process. The multiple ways of performing the process caused conflicts between the groups and did not support the organization's goal of automating its business processes. Over several meetings the team interactively mapped the old process and discussed how to improve the process to make it consistent. They documented the new process and even piloted the new process to show its functionality and feasibility. Yet once the new process was issued for implementation, the working groups did not follow the new business process.

As you read this story, you may be adding context to this story such as: telling yourself what you would have done differently, or additional steps Sally could have performed in standardizing this business process. You also might be judging Sally, saying she failed as a project manager since she was unable to implement the business process. Maybe you are reliving a similar experience and noticing how you felt during your project, the interactions you had with colleagues and management, and what you were able to achieve. Maybe you said things like "The other groups were very difficult to work with.", "They did not like me." or "Harold, a key member of my project team, was distracted during most of this project since he was having health issues, so I gave him leeway to not participate as much as he should have." As you consider the facts, it is natural to start to build context around those facts that can be supportive or judgmental. Through a mindfulness practice we start to learn how to separate the facts from the context, so we can reframe the story to empower and refocus our time and attention.

When you take a situation and break the facts from the context – or your story about the facts – you can focus on the components that empower you to grow as a project manager, instead of wallowing in what you could have done better. For example, Sally could focus that the project failed, or she could state that the project was able to get five different working groups time to meet and discuss the existing and future process. It was a huge accomplishment to start to change culture. Maybe she could reframe the context to say, “Sally was able to establish a baseline for getting the working groups to discuss inconsistent business processes so future standardization projects would function smoother.” By reframing the story, you can empower yourself to grow as a project manager and learn how to improve for your next project. Also, by reframing a story to identify the empowering aspects or to see another person’s perspective, you get to see more than one perspective and support your growth as a project manager. Now that we discussed mindfulness, let’s explore what current research has to say about mindfulness.

REVIEW CURRENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATED WITH BEING MINDFUL

As of February 19, 2018, ClinicalTrials.gov^{viii}, included 64 ongoing or completed studies and PubMed, listed 4,992 research publications related to mindfulness. These studies assessed whether mindfulness affects conditions such as: attention, stress, sleep, pain, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension, cancer, diabetes, medication adherence, and migraines. One of the challenges with these studies is that there is not a commonly agreed upon definition for mindfulness. In addition, many of the published studies do not have sufficient number of study subjects to be able to make statistically sound conclusions. Since there is not a consistent definition and use different methods of applying mindfulness, it is difficult to combine the results from the variety of different studies. The data tends to show trends, possibilities, and possible correlations between mindfulness and physical and mental changes. Below are a couple studies to show the types of data being obtained and how mindfulness is being studied.

A study, sponsored by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH), a Center of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), found through the practice of mindfulness meditation, there were measurable changes in the regions of the brain involved in memory, learning, and emotion^{ix}. This study used magnetic resonance images (MRI) of the brains of 16 participants 2 weeks before and after they joined a meditation program and a control group of 17 non-meditators over similar time periods. The brain images in the meditation group revealed increases in gray matter concentration in the left hippocampus and four other brain regions involved in learning, memory, and emotional control.

In another study, Jha et. Al^x found that mindfulness training helped improve the focus and attention of soldiers during high-demand intervals of pre-deployment training. Three groups were studied, groups 1 and 2 received 8-hours of training for 8-weeks. Group 1 received Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT) with 50% of time spent practicing and 50% on lecture and content discussion; group 2 received didactic (or instructional) focused variant with 12.5% of time spent on practice and 87.5% of time on lecture and content discussions; and group 3 served as controls and did not receive any training. The MMFT group had better

retention of material so the mindfulness exercises seemed to protect the study subjects against memory lapses resulting from the mind wandering.

In addition to the research studies, companies have started to implement mindful leadership programs within their organizations. Companies such as General Mills, Google, and Target have established mindfulness programs. Google's program is described in "Search Inside Yourself, The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (And World Peace)^{xi}" by Chade-Meng Tan. These companies claim that they are offering these mindfulness programs due to the positive impact on employees and improved bottom line^{xii} of the organization.

A SIMPLE MINDFULNESS EXERCISE

To become a Mindful Leader requires perseverance and practice. In Angela Duckworth's recent book "Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance^{xiii}", she shares her research on grit. Grit has two main components: passion and perseverance. If you want to become more mindful, effort is more important than having an innate talent. By combining talent with effort, you gain skill and by combining skill with effort you get achievement. Dr. Duckworth noted that effort counts twice. The more effort we put into learning to become mindful the more likely you are to achieve it. Also, you must consistently practice to maintain the ability, otherwise you may lose the skill.

You might already have a mindful exercise you practice regularly. For example, Tai Chi, martial arts, yoga, meditation and prayer are examples of mindful exercises you may already be practicing. You also may have an app on your smartphone or watch that tells you "It's time to breathe." If so, these are great ways to begin to develop a mindfulness practice. Just keep in mind that simply because a pop-up says it is time to practice, it may not be the best time for you to practice. Be mindful of what is best for you and your situation.

The following is an example of a mindfulness exercise you can practice through-out your day. This practice consists of three steps: preparation, awareness, and closing.

Begin by coming to a comfortable seated position. Maybe placing your feet flat on the floor and allowing your back to be supported, yet not slumped. You may feel more comfortable closing your eyes or looking toward the floor. Prepare yourself by taking three deep breaths in and releasing them.

Start by pressing a toe into the floor as you bring focus of your attention to your breath. Feel your breath move in and out of your body.

Notice the quality of your breath

- *Is your breath shallow or deep?*
- *Are you breathing from your chest or your belly?*

If your mind starts to wander, bring your attention back to your breath.

When you are ready, remove the pressure of your toe and take a deep breath and as you let your breath out bring your awareness back to your surroundings.

SUMMARY

When we are mindful, we carefully observe our thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad. Instead of letting go and letting life pass us by, mindfulness embraces living in the moment and awakening to our current experience, rather than dwelling on the past or anticipating the future^{xiv}. Being mindful allows us to focus our attention on what is happening right now in a curious and open manner. We explore what we are feeling and maybe why, so we can decide how we want to respond to a situation. Yes, we will make mistakes and not make every decision perfectly, and that is okay. Through a mindfulness practice, we learn that it is okay to begin again – whether bringing our mind back to the breath, apologizing to someone for our behavior, or just acknowledging the situation and how we contributed to it. If you think about your project, mindfulness can help you focus your attention and awareness on what is important right now.

Being a mindful leader can help you be a better project or program manager through cultivating a practice that helps you be more focused and cultivating presence and the ability to pause. Thus, allowing you to focus on a single task, observe what is going on around you and actively listening to what is being said. When you pause you get space, so you can learn to respond instead of reacting in stressful situations and you can reframe a story.

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