

## MINDFULNESS

The East and West are converging not only materially – through global trade, virtual networks, manufacturing technologies and consumer fashions – but also psychologically through the development and integration of previously diverse views of the world. This convergence is nowhere as evident as in the work being done to integrate universal methodologies of leadership development. At the center of the hurricane of economic globalization is the quiet space of *mindfulness* – a philosophy and practice which helps those exercising leadership to situate themselves calmly in the eye of the hurricane, where they are able to tap into the clarity and creativity necessary to ensure wisdom in decision-making and focused, authentic leadership.

The notion of mindfulness has its origins within Buddhist traditions, where the technique has been developed for over 2500 years as a powerful tool for self development. The skill is acquired by being truly present in the here and now. As early as 1940s, mindfulness entered mainstream Western psychotherapy with Gestalt Therapy. Today Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction<sup>1</sup> and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy<sup>2</sup> are only two of the many forms of mindfulness practice used in healthcare and in management and organizational development.<sup>3</sup> Research shows how mindfulness leads to significant changes in the brain: more cognitive flexibility, creativity and innovativeness, higher levels of well-being, better emotional regulation, and

more empathy due to increased levels of alpha and theta wave activity.<sup>4</sup>

Mindfulness involves the ability to accurately recognize where one is in one's emotional landscape and allows one to enhance one's understanding, empathy, and capacity for accurate analysis and problem-solving. Those employing mindfulness techniques develop a "more nuanced appreciation of context and of alternative ways to deal with it."<sup>5</sup> The moment-to-moment awareness of a mindfulness experience provides a richer, more vital sense of situations that transforms habitual unconscious reactions into original conscious actions.

The world is a complex place and this complexity appears to be increasing – and with it increases our insecurity. In the wake of these overwhelming demands emerges an organizational culture of fear – we become anxious about our own competence and we become afraid of making mistakes and incurring the judgment of others. Because we feel overwhelmed by this rapidly evolving complexity of organizational life, our capacity to access mindfulness is overlooked.

The human mind is well developed to "cope" with such complexity, although "simply coping" does not often lead to optimal effectiveness. If managers believe they do not have the time to work through all aspects of a problem, they are inclined to use **cognitive shortcuts**. Managers become more



**Ben Bryant**  
IMD Professor  
of Leadership and  
Organization



**Jeanny Wildi**  
IMD Research Associate

**In taking cognitive shortcuts, managers' actions tend to become "mindless."**

"impulsive, and in so doing, they rely on familiar scripts, schemas, mental models, rules of thumb, habits, and routines that help them make sense of their environments. Relying on impulses is not the same as relying on intuition, however. In taking cognitive shortcuts, managers' actions tend to become "mindless". For example, you might receive an angry email from a peer, who is on another continent. If you act impulsively and fire off another angry response, it probably means you are not fully aware of your own emotions and defensiveness, and this makes it unlikely that you will be able to empathize with and understand what is really going on for your colleague. Mindlessness prevents you from attending to the many sources of information you have – including the signals from your own body. Being impulsive may make you feel better by temporarily removing the unpleasant emotions and thoughts...until you receive another response from your colleague. And then we tend to get into a cycle of revenge and escalation. Such cognitive mindlessness may feel like an inevitable response to a fast paced, global world. Such "decisiveness" might even be mistaken for effective leadership, but it puts obstacles in the path of effective leadership by preventing awareness and adaptation to the multi-level reality before us. A corporate culture of cognitive shortcuts results in oversimplification, curtailed curiosity, reliance on engrained beliefs, and perceptual blind spots.

**"On life's journey faith is nourishment, virtuous deeds are a shelter, wisdom is the light by day and right mindfulness is the protection by night."** Buddha

#### **The core elements of mindfulness**

In order to increase their effectiveness, leaders should become more mindful of what is going on in terms of their own thoughts, emotions and body, and what is going on in the context. These two approaches are based on the different traditions and practices of Western and Eastern philosophy and psychology. External mindfulness has its origins in the concrete Western orientation found today in cognitive and social psychology. Internal mindfulness has its origins in the ancient Eastern spiritual practice of meditation.



**External mindfulness** is being able to sense situations. It is being aware of the signals and cues in different contexts, noticing extraneous or unusual signs – and paying attention to them. The self and the environment are continually treated as emerging and novel. Situation-sensing, along with subsequent reflection, helps us create a gap between our reactions and external reality. **Internal mindfulness** is being aware of one's body, emotions and thoughts and requires the ability and attitude to monitor one's inner reality. Being aware of one's own mental responses to internal stimuli sounds easy, but in practice, it is not. The practice of mindfulness, whether external or internal, is based on a few key practices that are simple on the surface, but difficult to master.

#### **1. Detaching from the outside**

The first steps of mindfulness involve detaching from the outside world and from one's inner thoughts and emotions. There is a big difference between having a thought, or feeling an emotion, and being aware that you are having a thought, or being aware that you are feeling an emotion. An illustration of detachment could be that of watching a thriller movie. One can either be caught up in a web of emotions that the movie

evokes, or one can step back and consider that this is a beam of light passing through a piece of moving celluloid which is projecting onto a screen with some sound and music that are designed to generate particular emotions. The latter would be an example of detaching.

When we are caught up in our impulsive routines and the accompanying emotions in the midst of a complex situation, we tend to block out our receptiveness to internal and external data. We take a cognitive shortcut and become fixated on single external factors. We develop selective perception, and we are unable to see what is really going on.

## 2. Noticing

Once we have detached from the outside world and our emotions and thoughts, we develop the ability to notice things. Noticing is what young babies seem to do a lot of. Sometimes we see them fix a gaze on someone or something unfamiliar. The baby has no idea what to make of the stranger, and because of that, they are able to notice everything. We seem to lose the capability to notice without judgment as we grow older. We apply old formulas to new problems. So everything starts to look familiar – the same old thing – and when it is not familiar, we search for a familiar box to push it into.

“Noticing” means being able to take in impressions without immediately attaching meaning or adding judgment to them. This is very difficult for human beings. Our brains are searching for meaning in everything we hear and see, so that we can simplify, evaluate, and decide what to do. Unfortunately, we all too often contaminate our own perceptions with unexamined assumptions we have already internalized. Noticing contributes to mindfulness by keeping us open to our experience of the external .

## 3. Here and now awareness

When faced with complex problems, we tend to multiply the sources and quantity of information available, and this frequently results in information overload – we become prisoners of too much cognitive input, when what we should do is improve the quality of the attention we give to the here and

now. Psychologists have shown that people who are happier in life tend to be satisfied with what they have right now, rather than aspiring for something in the future and subsequently attaining it. Here and now awareness contributes to mindfulness by liberating mental energy and allowing us to pay heed to immediate experience – as it happens.



## Mindfulness in leadership situations

During a meeting with the executive team, the CEO of a major utility company was sensing high levels of power struggle and resistance in his team. After a prolonged debate, consensus had finally been reached on the issue of a recent takeover – or so it appeared. Yet he noticed that the mounting dissonance had not truly subsided. There remained some emotional resistance under the surface, he suspected, so he stopped speaking. He looked around the table into each team member’s eyes and sat down. Then he said, “OK. Let’s just drop this agenda today. What is really going on here, guys? How’s everyone feeling right now?” At that point, the team members started to speak from their emotions, describing what was going on for them. Everyone became more aware of what was happening within themselves and for each other. The conversation, which had been stuck until that point, became more exploratory and creative.

In this example, the CEO’s mindfulness heightened his sensitivity to his own and his

**“Our brains are searching for meaning in everything we hear and see, so that we can simplify, evaluate, and decide what to do.”**

team members' emotional discomfort. Instead of automatically closing the meeting after it looked like they had achieved "consensus", he unexpectedly stopped the discussions with a surprising question that invited everybody into the here and now. This leader responded by detaching himself and his team from the meeting agenda, noticing his surroundings and becoming aware of the here and now, and this allowed others to free themselves up from the emotions and frustrations they had been holding. His meeting had technically finished, but he made the mindful choice to focus on detaching from what was apparently going on and focusing on what was really going on. The effect of this was liberating for everyone.

### Mindfulness in practice

We are obsessed with control today – we are obsessed with controlling our careers, our employees, our finances, our future, our whole lives. We even try to control our spouses and children! But we have so little awareness of how our minds, our emotions and bodies work to *constrain* our effectiveness as human beings and as leaders. Developing skills in mindfulness can take many years, as in the Buddhist traditions, but we stand to benefit immediately from discovering how to detach and develop a deeper sense of what is truly happening at the moment – outside and inside us.

Mindfulness, as a skill, is a capacity within each of us that can be developed with practice. How does one develop this skill? The training involves disciplining ourselves to become more attuned to our immediate experience. It requires disciplining our minds to focus immediately and repeatedly on the awareness of thoughts, emotions and psychological processes through detachment, noticing our surroundings, and becoming increasingly aware of the here and now of our environment and of our bodily sensations, emotional feelings, and our thoughts and images.

Training methods – especially deeper behavioral methods employed at IMD in high-intensity leadership programs – that employ an awareness of mindfulness, facilitate the development of responsible leadership. As we begin to think and feel in a more nuanced and differentiated way, our behavior becomes more spontaneous, more tolerant, and more flexible in engaging reality. Mindfulness allows us to exercise leadership more responsibly by letting go of habitual patterns and rapidly adapting our behavior to meet the demands of new and unexpected situations.

**"You have power over your mind - not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength."** Marcus Aurelius

- 1 Kabat-Zinn, J. *Full catastrophe living*. New York; Bantam Doubleday Dell. 1990.
- 2 Segal, Z., Williams, M. & J. Teasdale, *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression; A new approach to preventing relapse*. New York: Guilford Press. 2001.
- 3 "Zen and the Art of Corporate Productivity". *Business Week*. July 28, 2003; "The Science of Meditation" *Time*, August 4, 2003.
- 4 Davidson et al. (20xx); Lutz et al. (2004); Brown & Ryan (2003); Baer (2003); Carlson et al. (2003); Shapiro et al. (1998); (Sugiura, 2004/7); Krieger et al., (2005); Elsbach (*Org science* 2006); Grossman et al. (2004).
- 5 Langer, E. 1989, *Minding Matters: The consequences of mindlessness-mindfulness* in L. Berkowitz (ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 22. San Diego: Academic Press, 159.

IMD is ranked number one worldwide in executive education (*Financial Times*, 2008). IMD's MBA was ranked first worldwide in the 2007 FT "Ranking of the Rankings," the combined global annual MBA rankings from *Business Week*, *The Economist*, *Financial Times*, *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.