

MINDFULNESS – WHAT IS AND WHAT POTENTIAL OFFERS IN LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Because mindfulness practice focuses on how leaders use their attention, this is not just another construct that stands alongside many other weapons of leadership research and practice, it is both a perspective and a systematic method that helps leaders understand better and transform their own minds. Such an inner transformation changes both the way a leader sees the world and the way he acts and the results of his actions. In leadership, Mindfulness has a strong impact in managing stress, cultivating empathy, making better decisions in less time, innovative actions. It is important to understand that mindfulness is extremely efficient in developing attention and cognitive control, emotional self-regulation and reducing reactivity, all of which are essential for an effective adaptation to change and innovation with minimal energy and time consumption. Thus, it is desirable for the field of leadership to manifest a greater openness to the principles, methods and tools of mindfulness.

Keywords: leadership, mindfulness, innovation, stress management, adaptation to change

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The period that this society is going through is not just of information, but its development is realized in an interconnected way. Natural creative adaptation seems to be the only possibility by which man can keep up with the changes change of his world. The main idea that emerges from this point out is that, due to an increased rate of progress in all areas, individuals with a limited level of adaptability and flexibility will not be able to effectively solve the problems they face at work; moreover, the stressful situations that may occur in their life can have a negative impact on the health and quality of their personal life. In this context, lately, there is a tendency for a different approach to leadership, in which not only the professional performance of the organization is important, but also the well-being and interpersonal relationships within it.

1. The concept of mindfulness and the mindful leader

The concept of mindfulness appears more and more in the framework of effective leadership, in which entrepreneurs are interested in applying it at an advanced and innovative level.

Even if it has only become very popular in recent years, the main ideas of mindfulness are very old and come from the Buddhist religion. Starting from the mid-1980s, the Western world began to pay more and more attention to the concept of "mindfulness." The extremely busy lives of people often generate a frenetic multi-tasking activity, which forces people to do various things, leaving them no space to simply be.

Mindfulness, in its most general conception, is a gateway to a healthier way to be in the world. Mindfulness is the state of concentration in which we look at any situation exactly as it is, without being influenced by our past experiences, without judging, without labeling, fact that results in increased performance in work, more free time, a better relationship with others and, finally, an increase in the quality of professional and personal life, materialized by experiencing permanent states of harmony and balance.

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Research on some aspects of mindfulness practices like awareness and presence show that they greatly improve the functioning of the body: they heal, generate the immune response, reduce reactivity to stress, and bring a general sense of physical well-being. Also, our relationships with others are improved, because our ability to perceive nonverbal emotional signals emitted by other people, as well as the ability to sense the inner worlds of others, are enhanced.

The birth and the evolution of the idea of "leadership" are concepts that go beyond the idea of a single leader. In fact, contemporary definitions most often reject the idea that leadership depends on the leader's abilities, behavior, style and charisma. Today, the basic nature of leadership is discussed in terms of "interaction" between the people involved in the process: both leaders and subordinates. Thus, leadership is not the work of a single person, but can be defined as a "collaborative effort" between group members. So, the essence of leadership is not the leader, but the relationship.

To inspire subordinates to a higher level of teamwork, there are some ways a leader needs to be, to know and to do. These do not come from themselves, but they are acquired through work and permanent study. Good leaders work and learn continuously to improve their leadership skills. Although the role of manager, supervisor, etc. gives you the authority to meet certain requirements and goals in the organization, this power does not make you become a leader. Leadership is different because it makes subordinates to want to achieve higher goals, and not just to manage the world around.

The way we relate to change influences our success, and what our leadership aims to do is to facilitate problem solving in a positive, ethical way and to strengthen the society. Our belief is that applying mindfulness principles is a powerful and effective way to help leaders adapt to the challenges of today's era.

Leaders may face two types of challenges: technical and adaptive issues. Technically, the problems can be complex and difficult, but they can be tackled with tools already existing and known from previous experience. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are different from the technical ones, because both the problem and the solution may not be understood within the existing schemes. Adaptive challenges require leaders to grow and build more sophisticated ways of seeing and thinking, acting and relating. Adaptive challenges also arise when neither the problem nor the solution is well understood.

One common mistake the leaders make is misidentifying adaptation issues as technical, considering that yesterday's solutions could be applied to today's problem. This is due to the innate human tendency to act through known patterns, useful in stable circumstances, but which no longer adapt in the conditions of change. When the leaders apply an old map to a new problem, they become stuck, become stressed and frustrated by their lack of progress.

Challenges of adaptation are particularly difficult because they question the existing roles, orders and hierarchies. As a result, they are often stressful. Stress reactions are instinctive, automatic survival mechanisms that mobilize energy to adapt to a potential threat (Greenberg, Carr, & Summers, 2002). Under these conditions, in the case of poor performance, leaders may experience a series of negative effects that can leave them disoriented, ¹disconnected, scared and frustrated. However, leaders must demonstrate that they are calm, have everything under control, are able to inspire, motivate and make wise decisions. In other words, they have to handle with their own neurobiology. Failure to self-manage affects a leader's health and diminishes his performance. (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005)

Because the challenges of adaptation often require a complex collaboration with others, the quality interpersonal relationships are essential. The growing importance of the quality of interpersonal relationships reflects a broad trend in organizations that have shifted

from hierarchical models of command and control to systems where formal authority is diminished. (Pearce & Conger, 2002) In such situations, the authority becomes more informal and connected, relying on the ability of the leader to connect, convince and motivate employees to act with limited resources. It requires high levels both cognitively and emotionally to demonstrate such leadership capabilities. Adaptive leaders need to cultivate their self-management skills in order to be able to work skillfully with others in solving adaptation problems. To be effective in meeting the challenges of adaptation, a leader must be able to bypass the use of old reaction patterns and find new and more sophisticated ways of solving problems.

The leaders must learn to evolve continuously, the result of this self-development being a more developed intellect, increased perceptual abilities, a better ability to innovate, self-management and self-direction.

The leaders need new tools to support them in effectively addressing current realities. A critical ability for adaptive leaders is the ability to be mindful - to be present and aware of themselves, of others, of the world around them, to recognize in real time their own perceptions (and their potential biases), their emotional reactions.

Mindfulness training can provide leaders practical ways to improve their awareness. On the other hand, they can significantly improve their potential in terms of adaptive actions and self-management. Mindfulness adds a powerful perspective of understanding the human actions.

2. How mindfulness affects leaders' performance

Today there is little research evidence on the application of mindfulness in leadership. (Bryant & Wildi, 2008). But, based on what is known about its effectiveness in other areas and in human life in general, it is estimated that applying mindfulness in leadership contexts is considerably beneficial.

Because mindfulness practice focuses on how leaders use their attention, this is not just another construct that stands alongside many other weapons of leadership research and practice, it is both a perspective and a systematic method that helps leaders understand better and transform their own minds. Such an inner change transforms both the way a leader sees the world and the way he acts and the results of his actions. What is different in applying mindfulness to other applications in leadership is that change occurs in the context of everyday actions.

Innovative leadership has its roots in a leader's ability to build in prescriptive mental models that help people and institutions understand and respond the crisis (Mumford, 2006). Mindfulness is a tool that makes it clear how a leader perceives and processes experience to build models of reality. Mindfulness also makes these models more adaptable to ¹conscious transformation. Increasing awareness capacity is more likely to produce an accurate understanding of a changing situation than the natural tendency to follow the old ways of thinking.

Mindfulness approaches a set of interrelated general problems that interfere with a leader's ability to causes adaptive changes: the instinctive survival reactions that undermine rational and collaborative actions and degrade personal health and individual and group resilience. We can talk about practical applications and build on the existing lines of research and development in leadership.

There is a possibility that the successful leaders of all times have used methods similar to mindfulness to cope with change, and ideas similar to mindfulness have long been discussed by prominent leadership scholars (Drucker, 2006; Heifetz, 1996).

In the following will be presented a general discussion about the basic conditions that support the need to apply mindfulness, regarding automatisms, the unconscious nature of human perception, thinking, emotion and action. Next will be presented an exploration of how mindfulness can help leaders in specific ways - managing stress and reactive emotions, making the best decision, innovative actions.

2.1. Automatisms and survival

Plenty of researches and leadership courses support the assumption that leaders are very aware, have a clear perception and act rationally. In this framework, emphasis is placed on setting goals and continuous learning, implicitly assuming that the leader's perspective is the best. However, psychological research shows that conscious action is more limited than previously thought. In fact, it is assumed that the vast majority of human actions, at least 90 percent, including thinking, feeling, value judgments are done through automatisms. On the one hand, the automatisms can be regarded as an efficient adaptation because they limit the consumption of cognitive resources that can thus be used to carry out several tasks.

However, there is a problem. The automatic models operate mechanically and rigidly. This is true both at the personal and organizational levels. Once the patterns are triggered, they apply the same every time. They can be effective in times of stability, but in times of great change, what has worked effortlessly in the past may no longer fit under different circumstances. For example, the strategy of successfully bringing a product on market may work in one era, but may fail in another, as General Motors' rise and fall has shown (GM). The company success after the war made it to ignore smaller foreign competitors, but of a higher quality, believing that GM approach of making cars is better. After decades of minimal adaptation and innovation efforts, the company has finally collapsed (Taylor, 2011). From here we can see that the automatisms are easy to set up, but it requires a lot of effort to eliminate them. In the case of GM, the adaptation occurred only when the results of the pattern used were so obviously disastrous that they forced the fundamental rethinking of the operations.

In the same way, a leader who has a behavior based on automatisms unconsciously self-limits his interactions both personally and organizationally, responding through limited and rigid actions.

Lasswell (1948), in his work "Power and Personality" stated that in democracy leaders must be aware of how non-conscious processes inform them and distort their judgments, actions and well-being. Because democracy relies on rationality to function efficiently, he spoke of the need for leaders to look within themselves and to know each other better in order to act more consciously and rationally. This is the function of mindfulness. Thus, it is considered that research and practice in leadership should focus more on the need to know the all-encompassing reality of the mind in order to manage the adaptation problems that can arise in entrepreneurship as efficiently as possible.

There is a certain set of automatic behaviors that are particularly problematic for situations that require creative, cooperative, and adaptive responses, named old survival programs, which were activated in primitive circumstances and which remained active, creating real problems in the complex social environment of a modern organization by triggering defensive reactions without passing through the filter of rationality. Prolonged exposure to stress can cause frost reactions in the face of the threat, which can be manifested in the organizational environment through lack of motivation.

Reactive emotions appear in patterns of behavior and their expression consumes large amounts of energy, consuming personal energy resources, removing people and, in time,

stiffening potential responses. Because these reactions are fast and unconscious, they undermine even the best-intentioned leader.

Unrestrained and unmanaged survival reactions undermine leadership effectiveness. The uncivilized reactions created by a leader's stress undermine the team's effort and weaken the commitment to an organization (Pearson & Porath, 2003). Moreover, antisocial behavior decreases the desire to be useful for the organization, creativity and the fulfillment of routine tasks (Porath & Erez, 2007).

Chronically stressed employees, who fear for their jobs and are overloaded with additional responsibilities, without having enough social resources and emotional support have poor performance, may suffer from burnout and even have suicidal thoughts.

2.2 Management of stress in leadership

Mindfulness effectively helps to manage excessive stress. Leaders often enjoy their position and consider their work stimulating (Lundberg and Frankenhaeuser, 1999), but leadership can also be extremely stressing. There is a state of stress of those who are in power positions, which results from the multiple pressures they are exposed to, inherent in leadership positions. There are opinions that stress is unavoidable in leadership positions and the key to successful leadership is not to avoid stress, but to regularly recover from its effects. These views argue that mindfulness is a key by which such recovery can be instituted.

Stress itself is the physiological response to any change - good or bad - that alerts the adaptive response to fight or fly in the brain and body. When experienced as an eustress, says Benson, it is accompanied by clear thinking, concentration and creative outlook. Distress, on the other hand, refers to the negative stressors that accompany much of the activity of a leader. Concerns about changing the global economy, the impact of uncontrolled events on the economic market, events on their markets and sources of financing, global oil supply, family problems, taxes, traffic jams, hurricanes, child abductions, terrorist attacks and devastation environment, all these are adaptation challenges and can cause distress. But for the mindful leader, they can also be a source of eustress.

It is important for organizations and leaders to realize that the types of chronic stress that they often come into contact within leadership positions have been linked to a wide range of illnesses. and dysfunctions such as thyroid, obesity, diabetes, inability to experience pleasure in normal situations, decreased immunity, psoriasis, lupus, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, chronic pain, cancer, heart disease, infertility and irritable bowel syndrome or others digestive disorders (Britton, 2005). Excessive stress, directly, can kill.

Therefore, chronic stress is an important problem in leadership. But the state of mindfulness helps the practitioner to consciously change the way they process experience, including stressful experiences. Thus, for the attentive leader, well prepared in order to manage their own stressors, adaptation challenges can be sources of eustress and not distress.

2.3. Management of reactive emotions

Within leadership relationships are essential to the smooth running of things. Quality of relationships matters. This matters even more when a situation becomes stressful.

According to a study, the emotional state of the leaders influences the emotional state of the employees. Thus, when leaders have a positive emotional state, group members experience the same state. In addition, in groups that have leaders with a positive mood, there is more collaboration and less energy is consumed to perform tasks than in groups that have leaders with a negative mood.

Given the impact of the leader's state of mind on the relationships within the organization, his ability to manage his own emotions is very important, and practicing mindfulness brings an important contribution here, improving the management of negative states.

According to the studies, the longer the mindfulness exercises are practiced, the greater the well-being, and the level of the negative states decreases, at the same time as the ruminations and the emotional reactivity. All this suggests that practicing mindfulness has the potential to help leaders better self-regulate in the face of stressors.

2.4. Perception of reality and cultivation of empathy

How we look at the world depends on the data we obtain. Those who practice mindfulness are more aware and use more objective data about the world around them.

A person looks at the world using external or internal encoders. The external ones pay attention to the facts of the environment, while the internal coders use rigid models, sometimes based on their own past experience, sometimes using information that has no connection with the experience. Internal coders tend to more easily support cognitive mismatches in the face of conflicting data because their data source tends to be self-referential and closed rather than objective and open. Instead, external coders tend to be more careful in deriving meaning through use of environmental data. They require more confirmation given by the world around them before setting up a scheme. There was a positive correlation between mindfulness and the tendency towards external coding. In other words, people who are more careful they tend to read the environment more accurately and are less subject to the potential distortion of internal biases.

What is beneficial for adaptive leaders in this context is that they have the opportunity to follow mindfulness exercises. By acquiring and practicing them, leaders may become able to make more accurate assessments of the environment in which they operate and are less likely to be misleading and subjective. Reasonably, trained mindfulness leaders are expected to have lower levels of automation, higher levels of situational awareness and, consequently, higher levels of objectivity than those who are not so trained.¹

In addition to drawing attention to the ability of mindfulness exercises to help leadership develop a better awareness of the situation by extending the state of presence, another important outcome of mindfulness training in the context of leadership development is the emergence of a state of increased empathy.

Practicing Mindfulness brings clarity in thinking and feeling; the practitioners are much better structured mentally and emotionally and more aware of the present moment. They also expand their capacity for empathy. In addition, mindfulness correlates with reducing negative emotions.

Because leadership is a social activity, the quality of the relationship between the leader and his employees is important because it helps in understanding the views of others, in building an efficient team and uniting the group to work productively. In times of conflict, mindfulness leaders demonstrate lower levels of anxiety and aggression.

2.5 Adopting better decisions

Mindfulness practices have an impact on the quality of decisions made. Cokely and Kelley (2009) draw attention to the relationship between higher working memory and higher decision-making at risk. If there is a higher working memory capacity, they suggest, so there is a higher decision-making capacity. Improving the baseline level of working memory through mindfulness practices has beneficial cascading effects for efficient decision-making processes, solving complex problems and emotional regulation, and are crucial to the effectiveness of their mission. All this suggests that leaders who practice mindfulness, when they are forced to make rational decisions under pressure, they benefit from better concentration and presence.

2.6. Innovative actions

The existence of the direct correlation between creativity and the practice of the state of mindfulness is known. Thus, following mindfulness practices, the mind presents a variety of ways of approaching a problem. As a result, for a mindful leader who the capacity for creativity, innovation and adaptation is much increased, benefiting from a broader vision¹ of things and more developed work skills.

3. Methods, practices and mechanisms of mindfulness

Mindfulness offers a powerful methodology for improving the well-being and effectiveness of leaders who are facing stressful and challenging conditions.

3.1. Mindfulness, attention and cognitive control

Mindfulness is a quality of attention. Attention plays a central role in mediating the relationship between the inner and outer worlds of a person.

The ability to control attention was "the very root of judgment, character and will." Focused attention is the central feature of optimal performance and flow experiences, while widespread attention, characterized by multitasking, is related to slower performances.

Attention plays a central, if not primary, role in almost every aspect of human behavior, especially in interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, mindfulness practice is an extremely efficient way of developing attention. Thus, leaders who practice mindfulness are more capable of presenting crucial attention - cognitive control and emotion regulation - under high stress conditions.

3.2. Methods of practicing mindfulness²

The methods of practicing mindfulness usually occur in the contexts of stress reduction programs.

The approach focuses on a group training course for eight weeks. Participants typically spend 2 to 3 hours per week in group sessions for teaching and they must perform approximately 45 minutes per day at home for each day of the course.

More complex variants have been developed for use in entrepreneurship. Participants learn more meditation practices. They learn to sit in meditation for twenty to forty minutes, depending on the structure of the course, allowing the mind to rest with focused attention on a certain instrument suggested by the instructor - their own breathing or sensations or sounds and so on. Most of these meditation sessions will be conducted while participants sit on chairs, others lying down. The participants also learn to be mindful while they are moving or practicing yoga. They learn also brief meditation sessions of one, two or three minute that can be alternated during the work. They learn to eat by keeping the attention focused on food or driving or washing their body.

In a word, participants are taught to keep their attention focused here and now.

3.3 Mechanisms of the mind

How does mindfulness help to adaptive challenges? Teasdale and Chaskalson (2011) suggest that there are three main mechanisms by which mindfulness exercises work. Participants in mindfulness training discover three main strategies that help them deal more creatively and less automatically with their thoughts and feelings.

Fundamentally, they learn to transform the internal conditions that support difficult spiritual states by learning to make changes in what their mind processes, how their mind

processes and their perception of what they process. As a result, the gradual practice develops skills that allow a greater degree of awareness of the used automatisms.

An example of this is the case of a leader whose team has recently merged with that of another division. Accustomed to work with people who are open and enthusiastic about their work, the leader now finds that he is dealing with a group that is reluctant and evasive. Given the lack of cooperation from their new colleagues, it seems highly unlikely that the target the team has to meet will be completed within the deadline. The leader calls a part of the members of the new team and tries to communicate about their concerns, but he encounters passive aggressive resistance. In the evening, at home, the leader is in a state of constant irritation, thinking of the new team members and their impact on the future of his career, but also how they changed the atmosphere in his old team. He cannot get this subject out of his mind.

Leaders who practice mindfulness often report a reduction in suffering as a result of such events. They may recognize that, as a result of practicing mindfulness exercises, such a situation, which would have previously kept them in a state of rumination for several hours, now disturbs them much less and this is much easier for them to accept, to go further and adopt a more constructive approach to what follows.

3.4. Changes in what the mind processes

The first and simplest strategy that a mindfulness practitioner uses for changing internal conditions that support difficult mental states is to change the content of what the mind processes (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011). This can be done by removing the attention from emotionally charged ruminations to aspects that are less likely to support the emergence and the continuation of patterns that maintain the difficulty. So, in the case of the meeting mentioned above, the leader who has the mindfulness skills could intentionally remove the attention from the thoughts and feelings of frustration, focusing on the sensations from the body while watching the air entering and leaving the lungs. In this way, the mind begins to calm down, and the leader becomes more capable of considering different possibilities for action.

3.5 Changes in the way the mind processes¹

While the first strategy changes what is being processed, the second approach it would be to keep the content in the mind unchanged, but to change the way the material is processed. In this situation emotions become objects of experience, to which our leader relates differently, not allowing them to overwhelm him, but observing them detached. In this way, the whole situation can be analyzed from a new point of view.

In leadership, the ability to regulate the emotional response has considerable advantages. There is also a significant correlation between the ways in which the mind addresses problems and the creativity, which has significant implications for leadership effectiveness.

3.6. Changes in what the mind processes

The third strategy is to change the perception of the processed material. For example, the perception "this new team is frustrating" can be changed with the following: "I am experiencing unpleasant thoughts and feelings right now." In this way, the leader redefines the experience, transferring the attention from the perception on the characteristics of the team to a statement on his immediate internal state. Thus new possibilities appear. Leaders who practice mindfulness learn to see their thoughts as mere thoughts, rather than as a reflection of a reality or a truth. This leads to a reduction of reactivity and at lower levels of suffering and

energy consumption (Baer, 2003; Teasdale, 1999). It also increases psychological flexibility. By not focusing on the team, the leader creates the opportunity to act differently, increasing the chances of a positive outcome.

Mindfulness offers a practical methodology for developing the skills that are essential for effective adaptation to change. Being used effectively in many professional fields, leadership may also have a greater openness to mindfulness principles, methods, tools.

Such training certainly brings significant value to leaders' professional lives in terms of their attentional abilities, levels of empathy and emotional intelligence, non-reactivity, creativity, innovation and general well-being. But what needs to be understood is that self-awareness does not always translate into effective action, but awareness increases the possibilities.

How can leaders manage to adapt effectively in the face of a major change? How can one avoid the common tendency to return to old cognitive structures in the face of unprecedented crises? How do leaders lead themselves and the stressors inherent in the tasks they face and the challenges of their responsibilities? Leaders need new tools to make their work more efficient.

Research has shown that mindfulness highlights changes in the brain that help leaders become more present, less emotionally reactive, more deliberate and focused on their thoughts and actions.

Learning to get out of an innate tendency to self-pilot by practicing mindfulness exercises, leaders can deliberately create new action that can lead us through the most difficult times.

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