

WHAT IS MINDFUL LEADERSHIP?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, our aim is to describe an emerging concept in the field of organizational behavior: “Mindfulness”. Mindfulness could be defined as the way to become aware of the body, the mind, the emotions and the spirit. It is often presented as a part of Emotional Intelligence (EI). It comes from ancient oriental traditions. It is far from being a recent concept. Even if it is an old concept, more than thousands of years old, it has emerged in the field of organizational behaviour only three or four years ago, mostly in the USA. It is unfortunate considering that mindfulness is part of the Indian culture, much more than it is of the Western culture.

In this paper, we call on scholars for doing intensive research on mindfulness. Four areas of research could be considered. First is effective decision making. We argue that any leader or manager will take better decisions if he/she is centered in a state of mindfulness. The second area concerns team work or relationship management. We argue that a mindful person can better transmit a vision to the team and inspire and motivate them. Because mindfulness leads to emotional stability, we argue that a mindful person is also more effective in dealing with conflicts that appear in the workplace. The third area concerns work-life balance. A mindful person is peaceful and calm, and therefore can effectively manage the stresses arising from work and personal life. The fourth area is eco-centric leadership. We argue that mindfulness helps one

recognize the interconnectedness between humans and nature. Therefore, mindful leaders develop eco-centric business models that promote a sustainable lifestyle.

In this paper we first describe the concept of mindfulness and trace its origins from Buddhist and Indian perspectives. Then, based on published research, we propose that mindfulness in leaders and managers plays a critical role in developing and nurturing a vision of sustainability that thrives on people-centric and eco-centric approach to business. We conclude by discussing the various avenues of research in this new field.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

“Sati” in Pali language was translated in English as “Mindfulness”. Mindfulness, which is the heart of Buddhist psychology (Germer et al. 2005) comes from a translation of this language used by Buddhist about 2,500 years ago. “Sati” is related to “attention”, “remembering” and “awareness” (Germer 2005). According to Germer (2005), a basic definition of mindfulness is “moment-by-moment awareness”, in the sense that being mindful is being *present*. A mindful person does not focus on the past or the future, but just look at what is occurring at the moment, without judging or rejecting it. Hanh (1976) defines mindfulness as “keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality” (p. 11). A mindful person feels alive (Morgan 2005). As Gunaratana (2002) states: “You become sensitive to the actual experience of living, to how things actually feel. You do not sit around developing sublime thoughts about living. You live” (p. 38). A Mindful person is still connected to the little child within herself/himself. “Mindfulness practice cultivates the states of openness and relaxed spontaneity into which

beginners in life—children—are born” as Goodman states (2005, p.197). Daft (2005, p. 132) defines mindfulness as “continuously reevaluating previously learned ways of doing things in the context of evolving information and shifting circumstances”. He further states, “Mindful leaders are open-minded and stimulate the thinking of others through their curiosity and learning. Mindless people let others do the thinking for them, but mindful leaders are always looking for new ideas and approaches”. Because a mindful leader is aware of every moment, he or she is available to experience living, is open-minded and thereby capable of continuous learning, adaptation and creativity.

Mindfulness generates:

- *Attention*. Mindfulness practice enhances the capacity of a person to be attentive. The quality of attention is both direct and indirect (Morgan and Morgan 2005). Directly, Reiman (1985) and Valentine and Sweet (1999) explain that mindfulness strengthens the ability of a person to get concentrated with any mental object. But mindfulness training, according to Morgan and Morgan (2005) can also improve the quality of attention indirectly, by giving the person intuitive “insights” that can emerge from the situation in the present moment. Then, it helps the person to understand better what is going on. It gives a better capacity and deeper understanding of any situation.
- *Surrendering the wish to know and control* (Fulton 2005, Siegel 2005). Being mindful means surrendering to the present moment, so tacitly it means that the person does not know what is going to happen after the present moment. Saying that, the person does not try to control the situation, knowing that he/she does not know. As Fulton beautifully states: “We surrender—albeit temporarily—our wish to know and control. We allow ourselves to not know” (Fulton 2005, p.70).

- *A deeper understanding of intersubjectivity* (Surrey 2005). Mindfulness practice enhances the ability of a person to feel connected with other human beings. The feeling of being separated, isolated, disconnected with others disappears with mindfulness.
- *Empathy and Compassion* (Fulton 2005, Morgan and Morgan 2005, Surrey 2005). When a person practicing mindfulness begins to look at the suffering inside herself/himself, then this person experiences compassion toward her/his own suffering. Mindfulness practice does more. It helps to accept the suffering, to stop wanting to reject it all the time. Then the person experiences a surrendering to suffering. When a person recognizes that everyone on earth experiences the same suffering and tries to escape from it, then compassion and empathy towards others emerges. Also, as described just before, mindfulness deepens the understanding of intersubjectivity, meaning that the artificial frontiers between human beings dissolve with practicing. Then it helps accentuating empathy and compassion towards others who experience the same suffering and the same strategies to be free of it.
- *Tolerance* (Fulton 2005). When practicing mindfulness, strong emotions emerge. In a mindful awareness, a person will not escape from these emotions but listen to them. According to Fulton (2005): “*Mindful* tolerance is marked by softening into and embracing the experience. In this process, powerful emotion loses some of its ability to intimidate” (p.60). Then it minimizes the ability of a person to affront his/her feelings. The person will not fear any more his/her own emotions. It is also the way to tolerate others’ feelings. If one cannot accept and face his/her own feelings, he/she cannot tolerate others’. Thus, practicing mindfulness affects tolerance towards others emotions, feelings

and the mindful person will find that he/she can tolerate much more than she/he had suspected.

- *Tranquility* (Morgan and Morgan 2005). Accepting whatever is arising in the present moment (thoughts, feelings, emotions and facts) cultivates calmness, peace of mind.
- *Concentration* (Morgan and Morgan 2005). A mindful person concentrates on the moment present. He/she trains to get back to the moment present whenever she/he gets distracted. According to Morgan and Morgan (2005), “it is the ‘backbone’ of optimal presence” (p.78).
- *Joy and Happiness* (Fulton 2005, Morgan and Morgan 2005). Practicing mindfulness helps to experience calmness, joy and happiness – a state of mind that is not easily disturbed by changing external conditions. Serenity emerges from not trying to escape the moment. A mindful person does not want to be anywhere else than here and now; she/he is enjoying fully the present moment.

MINDFULNESS: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

“Avekshanam” in Sanskrit is translated as mindfulness. It derives this meaning from the root “iksha” or the act of seeing. The prefix “ava”, when added to the root “iskha” means seeing backed by awareness/attention at the mind level. In Indian culture, mindfulness is emphasized as a means of achieving excellence in all possible endeavors. The following verse in the ancient text the *Abhinaya Darpanam* of Nandikesvara (dated by historians between 5th and 2nd century B. C., Ghosh, 1957) brings out the essence of the practice of mindfulness in the Indian classical performing art forms:

यतो हस्तस्ततो दृष्टिर्यतो दृष्टिस्ततो मनः
यतो मनस्ततो भावो यतो भावस्ततो रसः ॥३७॥

Yato hastastato drishTiryato drishTistato manah

Yato manastato bhavo yato bhavastato rasah ॥ 37 ॥

Nandikesvara, in his analysis of a mindful performance, says, “Where the gestures or actions are, there the vision is. Where the vision is, there the mind dwells. Such a mind becomes the seat of right emotions. A performance expressing such emotions brings out the intended emotional impact”. The import of this verse goes beyond mere performing arts and serves to define mindfulness in a practical context. Mindfulness is the presence of an attentive and aware mind in and through sensory perceptions and physical actions. This presence leads to enhanced perceptions and efficient actions. As Kashyap (2003, p. 24-25) explains, “Every work is the channeling of energies in a particular movement. You can do the task in two ways. In the ordinary mode ... you are not aware of the source of the energy coming into the movement. In the second mode or yoga mode [mindful actions], you feel ... the Center within from which the energies for the movement flow... The work done in such a mode is effective for ensuring the quality of the work and for making the body more conscious”.

Another facet of mindfulness in the Indian perspective is brought out in the Bhagavad Gita in the following verse:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ २-४७ ॥

karmany evadhikaras te ma phalesu kadacana |

ma karma-phala-hetur bhur ma te sango 'stv akarmani || 2-47 ||

Swami Chinmayananda (2006, p. 119-122) translates this verse as follows: “Thy right is to work only, but never to its fruits; let not the fruit-of-action be thy motive, nor let thy attachment be to inaction”. He further explains, “An action in the present, when conditioned by a future-time, appears as the fruit-of-the-action... The advice here is a call to man not to waste his present moment in fruitless dreams and fears, but to bring his best – all the best in him – to the present and vitally live every moment, the promise being, that the future shall take care of itself, and shall provide the [person] with ... accomplishments supreme”. In the Indian perspective, while performing an action, lack of mindfulness arises from fear of past failures and anxieties of future outcomes. Both these lead to stress at work. In a mindful action, the past has no influence except through lessons learned. The unborn future also plays no role in a mindful action except in planning. Therefore mindfulness in action is to be available in the present moment and naturally brings out the best in the person.

According to the above verse, one has control over the action but not over the result of the action. This is because there are many factors that determine the result of any action, of which performance is only one factor. Mindfulness enables one to recognize this truth, thereby enabling one to spontaneously surrender the will to know and control the results of actions a priori. This understanding directly translates as freedom from stress at work. Therefore one is completely available in the present moment.

MINDFULNESS AND EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

It is well established that leaders with people-centric approach to their business have enjoyed lasting success and growth (Dan Sanders, 2008, p.42). They have accomplished this by building a culture where people are valued more than the financial bottom lines. Even in personal careers, as pointed out by Dan Sanders (2008, p. 42-43), “the old career progression model’s outright dependence on tangibles (money, power, and materialism) is replaced with a proper balance between the need for material gain and for intangibles (humility, selflessness, and fulfillment). The result is what people need most today: the ability to make a living while making a meaningful difference.” Such a culture percolates in an organization from its leaders who set it as part of the organization’s core vision.

Another important realization among business leaders is that an organization with a vision centered on sustainability stands to thrive and succeed in a scenario of depleting resources and severe environmental crisis. Andrew Savitz and Karl Weber (2006) define sustainability in broad but precise contours:

- “Sustainability respects the interdependence of living beings on one another and on their natural environment.... Sustainability means operating a business in a way that causes minimal harm to living creatures and that does not deplete but rather restores and enriches the environment.”
- “Sustainability also respects the interdependence of various elements in society on one another and on the social fabric. Sustainability means operating a business in a way that acknowledges the needs and interests of all parties ... and that reinforces the network of relationships that tie them together.”

- “Sustainability also respects the interdependence of differing aspects of human existence.... Sustainability means operating a business so as to grow and earn profit while recognizing and supporting the economic and non-economic aspirations of the people both inside and outside the organization on whom the corporation depends.”

Based on the above conclusions of Sanders (2008) and Savitz and Weber (2006), it is proposed that mindfulness in leaders and managers plays a critical role in developing and nurturing a vision of sustainability that thrives on people-centric and eco-centric approach to business. The rest of this section expounds on the above thesis.

People-Centric Business Leadership

There is increasing realization among the business community that a merely financial and power-based business practice is unsustainable (Dan Sanders, 2008, p.42-43). Such a practice places considerable strain on the social fabric and entirely ignores the values of the people that make up an organization and its customers, including personal life, intellectual growth, and artistic expression, moral and spiritual development. Mindfulness in leaders and managers forms the basis of a three-step approach in restructuring business practices to be people-centric:

- 1) It takes a team of mindful leaders and managers to be sensitive of the impact of business practices on the lives of all the stakeholders of the corporation.
- 2) Creating a business policy that actively builds sustainability in a holistic manner as described above demands mindfulness.
- 3) Mindfulness in leaders and managers plays a critical role in the successful implementation of a people-centric business policy.

Some of the critical challenges faced by people-centric business leaders are:

a) Effective Decision Making:

Businesses are replete with situations where a manager or a leader is racing against time to meet unrealistic targets, often facing unhealthy competitions leading to ethical dilemmas and compromised personal values. Being attentive enables the manager to observe the situation objectively and arrive at the most appropriate decision.

b) Conflict Management

Conflicts typically arise because of differences in goals, values and limited resources. To understand and resolve conflicts without prejudices and personal biases, one needs to have an empathetic and a compassionate mind.

c) Crisis Management

The most critical requirement for crisis management is to remain stable emotionally, be present and observant throughout and have high levels of crisis tolerance.

d) Work-Life Balance

Mindfulness helps developing tranquility (calmness, peace of mind) and joy. An individual who is mindful is therefore free from stress related to work and the various demands of personal life.

The emotional state of a leader significantly impacts his or her team and their ability to face the diverse challenges as mentioned above. Therefore, one expects a strong correlation between the emotional intelligence of a leader and his or her mindfulness. Goleman (1995, p. 38) defines emotional intelligent leaders as “people ... who know and manage their own feelings well, and who read and deal effectively with other people’s feelings”. He follows Salovey and Mayer

(1990, p. 189) in defining five domains of emotional intelligence, namely, *knowing one's emotions (self awareness)*, *managing emotions*, *motivating oneself*, *recognizing emotions in others (empathy)* and *handling relationships*. A mindful leader is always aware of the present moment and is able to observe it without judgment. In that given moment, he or she is therefore able to clearly comprehend the emotions of the self as well as of others. This helps the mindful leader to manage one's emotions and those of others better and with empathy and compassion. Therefore a mindful leader has high emotional intelligence.

Eco-centric Business Leadership

One of the clear reasons for the current environmental crisis is that human beings viewed nature as separate from them, sought to learn, control and exploit nature as a resource. This has been the vision of businesses since the industrial age, and has permeated and shaped our lifestyles. Such a lifestyle has blinded us to the harmful effects on nature, and has led us to the dangerous possibility of severe destruction to humankind. The first step in reversing this alarming trend is the recognition of our connectedness with others and with nature. This deep and abiding connection arises from mindfulness. This intersubjectivity forms the guiding principle of a vision of sustainable business leaders.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Mindfulness is a concept that has been discussed extensively in the literature as cited above. Mindfulness in the context of effective and sustainable leadership offers a number of exciting avenues for research. This paper identifies the effect of mindfulness on effective decision

making, conflict management, crisis management, work-life balance and eco-centric leadership as possible avenues for future research and puts forth the thesis that mindfulness in leaders plays a critical role in developing sustainable, people-centric and eco-centric approaches to business.

CONCLUSIONS

Thera (1996, p.23) states, “In its elementary manifestation, known under the term attention, [mindfulness] is one of the cardinal functions of consciousness without which there cannot be any perception of any object at all.” The direct implication of the above statement is that mindfulness is the most natural state of one’s being. Therefore, any attempt to develop mindfulness in oneself is a way of relaxing into one’s innate mindfulness. This is the rationale behind practicing meditation (contemplative practices) to develop mindfulness. This paper defines mindfulness, provides an Indian perspective of mindfulness, and discusses how mindfulness fosters effective and sustainable business leadership. It also outlines possible avenues for future research to further establish the impact of mindfulness on effective leadership.

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