

## Finding the Space to Lead

By Janice Marturano, Founder, Institute for Mindful Leadership

*"Opportunities for leadership are all around us, the capacity for leadership is deep within us"*

—Former Secretary of State  
Madeline Albright

I love this quote from Secretary Albright. It is a powerful reminder of the need for leadership in all sectors of our society—business, non-profit, government and military. And it is an important reminder that the capacity to embody leadership begins from within, 'deep within'. And yet too often, leaders are not offered the very training that is foundational to all other leadership training. The training that begins to teach us about the wealth of information and wisdom that is at the core of who we are, and the training that begins to teach us about the filters, conditioning and distractibility of the mind that may be limiting our ability to lead with excellence.

In the Institute's Mindful Leadership retreats and courses, we experience mindful leadership training as a way to strengthen and cultivate four hallmarks of leadership excellence—**focus, clarity, creativity and compassion**—hallmarks that originate from within. The first hallmark is '**focus**'. More and more often, I hear about the struggles people have with maintaining focus. It is difficult to stay focused on an article or a project, or even a conversation. Too often, even when we intend to stay fully attentive, we notice our thoughts wandering away, distracted by virtually anything that pops up. In fact, today we almost never fully attend to anything. What are the ramifications of this?

When we are distracted, we lose productivity. Every time we need to redirect our attention to a project or a

report, we need to spend time getting our mind back to the place we left off and back to the relevant thoughts. This reset takes time, and it also interrupts the stream of steady focus necessary to delve deeply into the most complex strategic issues and opportunities.

And when our focus wanes in a conversation or meeting, we lose not only productivity, but we lose connectivity. The connections we form when we are fully present and therefore fully listening can mean the difference between the person who is speaking leaving an encounter feeling heard or leaving an encounter feeling disrespected. We might wonder if someone can tell if our mind is wandering when they are speaking to us. Can they notice when my mind wanders to the next meeting even if I maintain eye contact and nod my head from time to time? Of course they know. The kind of focus that brings our attention fully to what is being said is a connection that can be felt by the speaker. And when our mind wanders, the connection is lost.

When we begin the practices in mindful leadership designed to strengthen our focus, we learn how to redirect our attention so that we not only notice when the mind is pulled away from the present, but we know how to work with it. Over time, we begin to notice it more and more quickly. We build the mind's capacity to aim and sustain focus.

Next, we use mindful leadership training to develop the ability to see what is here with greater '**clarity**'. In the constant busy-ness of business, we can find ourselves going on auto-pilot to make it through the day. We reach 6pm and wonder where the day went, or whether we actually did anything important. In this auto-pilot mode, we

**The Institute for Mindful Leadership** is a non-profit organization dedicated to unlocking a leader's potential to be fully present in the fast-paced complexities of today's environment by embodying the practices of mindful leadership. The application of mindfulness to daily leadership challenges is an emerging practice that cultivates greater clarity of thought, communication excellence and mental resiliency by teaching leaders to 'train the mind' just as an athlete leverages specialized training to 'train the body'. Through the training of mindful leadership, participants develop the mind's innate capacity to be more focused, to see with greater clarity what is here, to generate greater spaciousness for creativity and to embody true compassion.

Our mission is to deliver exceptional mindful leadership training and ongoing support to officers, directors, managers, professionals, future leaders, and to other significant community influencers in all sectors of our society. We offer retreats, workshops and courses that use curricula designed to reflect the challenges and opportunities of leading in today's global communities. Leaders from organizations from around the world have participated in these unique programs taught by experienced business leaders and have gained a more developed appreciation for the innate ability to be focused, clear, creative, and compassionate.

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can get so caught up in reactivity that we fail to see something we should have noticed. We see what we expect to see, what we hope to see or what we want to see...but not what is actually here. Learning to step out of the auto-pilot mode and stop long enough to notice when you are in reactivity mode is a training of Mindful Leadership that develops our ability to see clearly what is here, the issues and the opportunities, and to choose how to respond.

As the world continues to shrink, the markets become more global, resources become more scarce and the old playbook no longer applies. We need leaders with the ability to see clearly what is happening. They need to be aware of their own filters and conditioning so they can be open to the

many changing variables that need to be evaluated with accuracy and speed.

And as the evaluation is completed, we need our leaders to have access to all of their internal capacities for **creativity**, the third hallmark of leadership excellence. When we have a calendar that is fully packed with meetings, and a Task list that fills several pages, the availability of the spaciousness needed for creativity is minimal. Creative solutions and ideas have a better chance of arising when the mind is not constantly busy with our 'to do' lists. Have you ever noticed that setting aside time to think of a creative solution is not nearly as fruitful as an approach that identifies the problem, and then allows the mind to simply work at its own pace? How many times have you awakened with an answer, or perhaps it popped into your head while you were in the shower. Why? A constant stream of

thinking actually gets in the way of that wisdom that is deep within. We can train our mind to stand in a different relationship to those thoughts and cultivate more spaciousness for creativity through Mindful Leadership training.

Finally, we need to cultivate our innate capacity for **compassion**. And it needs to begin with us. This was not an easy lesson for me to learn, and it is not an easy lesson for most leaders. In the 25 years that I have held leadership positions, I have had the great privilege of working with wonderful people in all sectors of our society. They were leaders with warm hearts and bright minds, and they generally put themselves at the bottom of the list of those who needed compassion. Compassion is a powerful force and can be defined as 'understanding.' So when we fully realize our capacity for leadership by going 'deep within,' we are including our willingness to understand ourselves and to be willing to make choices that are nourishing and supportive of who we are. Only when we honestly embody self-compassion can we then offer it to those around us, and to the larger community in which we live and work.

Just as we know that we can develop our body's innate capacities to increase our strength, flexibility and resiliency, we now know from the field of neuroscience that we can develop the mind's innate capacities, including its capacity to focus, see clearly, be creative and act with compassion. We can no longer afford to have those in positions of influence lead without training the mind's full capabilities. In the Institute for Mindful Leadership retreats and workshops that my colleagues and I teach to employees and leaders from around the world, we repeatedly hear people say that this experience and practice has allowed them to see a fuller and more meaningful way to live their lives, and to lead with more of

who they really are, rather than trying to lead like someone else. They come to appreciate their capacity to offer inspiration, not just set expectations, and they notice the potential richness that comes from the choice to hold ambiguity for a time rather than making a quick, 'check the box' decision. These, and many other discoveries, come from a practice that is consistent and practical. An investment of 15 minutes a day will do to get you started, and there are an infinite number of ways to practice informally once you have experience the basic Mindful Leadership training (see the Meditation Hallway practice below).

As leaders, our best hope for influencing in a productive and authentic way is to learn to use all of our mind's abilities, including our ability to practice Mindful Leadership, to embody leadership presence.

### Meditation Hallway

If you care to explore a 'taste of Mindful Leadership training,' try the following Meditation Hallway practice:

Choose a hallway or stairway that you frequently walk through during the day. Each time you pass through this space, bring your attention to the sensations of walking. With each step, notice the touch of the floor, the movement of the ankle and toes, the swing of the foot, the touch of the air, the weightiness of the legs, etc. Feel the sensations, do not think about them! When you notice that your mind has drifted away, simply redirect it to the sensation of walking. Do you notice any differences in how you arrive at your next meeting?

This simple practice can begin to break holes in the auto-pilot, reactivity by bringing us back to this moment. Our body sensations can only be felt in the present so practicing by bringing our attention to body sensations immediately takes us to the present. ■



**Janice L. Marturano** is the Founder and Executive Director of the Institute for Mindful Leadership, a non-profit organization dedicated to training and supporting leaders in the exploration of mindfulness

and leadership excellence. She founded the Institute for Mindful Leadership in January, 2011, after ending her tenure as Vice President, Public Responsibility and Deputy General Counsel for General Mills, Inc.

Janice was a strategic leader within General Mills for nearly 15 years before leaving to dedicate herself full time to the Institute. While at General Mills, she co-developed the very first mindful leadership curricula at the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness where she served as a member of the Advisory Board. As a certified teacher of mindfulness and an experienced former officer of a Fortune 200 company, she has brought the intensive training of mindful leadership to leaders from all forms of organizations-corporate, non-profit, academic and government, military.