

# Mindfulness & Leadership

by Alex Trisoglio

*“The pursuit of mindful leadership will help you achieve clarity about what is important to you and a deeper understanding of the world around you. Mindfulness will help you clear away the trivia and needless worries about unimportant things, nurture passion for your work and compassion for others, and develop the ability to empower the people in your organization”*

– Bill George, Professor of Management Practice, Harvard Business School, 2012<sup>1</sup>

Now that Harvard Business School professors are teaching the benefits of mindfulness, it's perhaps fair to say the practice of mindful leadership has arrived in the corporate world. From Google to Genentech to the US Army, leading organisations have developed mindfulness programs and they are seeing results. We are still at the stage of experimentation and early adoption, but there are good reasons to think we'll look back on this decade as the start of a new era of more mindful leadership. This article aims to give an introduction to this rapidly evolving field and offer a sense of how things might unfold. We'll first look at how mindfulness is being introduced into organisations today to deal with stress and to develop emotional intelligence. Then we'll look at how mindfulness can also be used to develop the kind of transformational leadership needed in today's increasingly turbulent business environment.

## 1 Mindfulness, stress and emotional intelligence

The rationale for introducing mindfulness is straightforward enough: organisational life is stressful, and becoming more so. Stressed and disengaged employees are less healthy, less happy and less productive than their colleagues. Scientific evidence

demonstrates that mindfulness meditation is an effective way of dealing with stress and developing greater emotional intelligence. As a result, mindfulness-based programs are being introduced in companies, schools, prisons, and other organisations. Let's look at these points one at a time.

### The stress of organisational life

First, organisational life is filled with pressure and stress. In the current economic climate, employees are being asked to do more with less, working long hours with increasingly heavy workloads. Globalisation and continuous technological innovation have redefined work, and blurred the boundaries between work and life. “It's an old story now: we thought our technologies – laptops, smartphones, email – would free us from being stuck to the office,” says leadership author Peter Bregman, “but it's backfired: the office is now stuck to us.”<sup>2</sup> Tony Schwartz, founder of The Energy Project, is concerned about the consequences: “The defining ethic in the modern workplace is more, bigger, faster. More information than ever is available to us, and the speed of every transaction has increased exponentially, prompting a sense of permanent urgency and endless distraction.”<sup>3</sup>

But more isn't always better. According to the Yerkes-Dodson Law, first developed by psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson in 1908<sup>4</sup>, increased physiological or mental arousal only leads to increased performance up to a point. Beyond that point we become stressed and our performance declines, especially with the kind of cognitively demanding work that is at the heart of today's knowledge-based economy.<sup>5</sup> The McKinsey Quarterly sums things up: “Always-on, multitasking work environments are killing productivity, dampening creativity and making us unhappy.”<sup>6</sup> And many people are no longer able to cope with the levels of stress in their lives. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in a given year approximately 40 million U.S. adults – about 18% of the US population – are affected by an anxiety disorder.<sup>7</sup>

### The costs of employee stress and disengagement

Sustained stress doesn't just reduce performance; it makes us ill. Coronary heart disease, thyroid or endocrine burnout, obesity, diabetes, immune suppression, chronic fatigue, infertility and irritable bowel syndrome may all be consequences of the ongoing experience of stress.<sup>8</sup> The National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health finds that

stress-related ailments cost US companies more than \$200 billion a year in increased absenteeism, tardiness, and the loss of talented workers. 70% to 90% of employee hospital visits are linked to stress, and stressed employees are more likely to be unhealthy, unhappy and disengaged.<sup>9</sup> Surveys by Gallup and Towers-Perrin show that globally only 20% to 30% of employees are engaged, with significant costs in terms of productivity, growth and shareholder value creation.<sup>10</sup> More business leaders are realising that stress and disengagement at work aren't just 'soft' issues, and that it pays for companies to invest in tackling them. "Our people really are our greatest assets," says Kenneth Freeman, Dean of Boston University School of Management. "CEOs that lose touch with that truth spread misery unnecessarily and ultimately put their companies at risk. Talented, engaged, and aligned people hold the key to creation of long-term value."<sup>11</sup> As *Business Week* concluded, "Stress is pretty much the No. 1 health problem in the workplace."<sup>12</sup>

Since 40% of our working lives – some 90,000 hours – will be spent at work, the need to reduce stress and disengagement isn't just a business issue. It's a human issue, one that cuts to the core of life in the modern world. Western nations may indeed be 'advanced' and 'developed' in technological and economic terms, but it's a tragic waste of human potential and a major detriment to our overall quality of life if our time at work isn't happy and productive. We can do better than this, and leading companies believe that bringing mindfulness to the workplace is part of the solution. "Google wants to build the happiest and most engaged workforce on the planet," says Rich Fernandez, Senior People Development Lead at Google.

"What works? Wisdom, mindfulness and compassion."<sup>13</sup>

### The growth of mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness is defined by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."<sup>14</sup> Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh offers a more poetic description of mindfulness as being "deeply in touch with the present moment."<sup>15</sup> Mark Williams, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Oxford University explains what this means: "Mindfulness is a translation of a word that simply means awareness. It's a direct, intuitive knowing of what you are doing while you are doing it. It's knowing what's going on inside your mind and body, and what's going on in the outside world as well. Most of the time our attention is not where we intended it to be. Our attention is hijacked by our thoughts and emotions, by our concerns, by our worries for the future, and our regrets and memories of the past. Mindful awareness is about learning to pay attention, in the present moment, and without judgement. It's like training a muscle-training attention to be where you want it to be. This reduces our tendency to work on autopilot, allowing us to us choose how we respond & react."<sup>16</sup>

The practice of mindfulness has been central to Buddhism since its birth in India over 2500 years ago, although its journey to the West has been long and slow. Although Buddhist philosophy was already having an important influence on Western thought by the early 20th Century, it took many decades for meditation practice to catch up. In

a 1936 review of a book describing Buddhist meditation, the editors of *Psychiatric Quarterly* noted that "the profound insight that the Orientals have into emotional life has long been acknowledged," but they felt that "considering the tempo of Western civilisation, it seems unlikely that bhavana (Buddhist meditation) could be utilized here to any great extent."<sup>17</sup> It was only with the emergence of the 1960s counterculture that meditation hit the mainstream, and only in 2003 that meditation reached the cover of *Time* magazine, in recognition of the fact that "Ten million American adults now say they practice some form of meditation regularly, twice as many as a decade ago. Meditation classes today are being filled by mainstream Americans who don't own crystals, don't subscribe to New Age magazines and don't even reside in Los Angeles."<sup>18</sup>

As meditation has become part of popular consciousness, it has started to influence the context for organisational life. Business leaders also practice mindfulness, including the man frequently named the best CEO of his generation, Steve Jobs.<sup>19</sup> Apple's founder was a Zen Buddhist and he spoke openly about how his time meditating in India shaped his worldview and, ultimately, Apple's product design.<sup>20</sup> "If you just sit and observe, you will see how restless your mind is," Jobs told his biographer, Walter Isaacson. "If you try to calm it, it only makes it worse, but over time it does calm, and when it does, there's room to hear more subtle things – that's when your intuition starts to blossom and you start to see things more clearly and be in the present more. Your mind just slows down, and you see a tremendous expanse in the moment. You see so much more than you could see before. It's

a discipline; you have to practise it.”<sup>21</sup> Other influential CEOs who have talked about their meditation practice include Bill George, Professor of Management Practice and Henry B Arthur Fellow of Ethics at Harvard Business School and former CEO of Medtronic; Bill Gross, founder of Pacific Investment Management and manager of PIMCO’s \$270-billion Total Return Fund; and Ray Dalio, founder of the investment firm Bridgewater Associates, the largest hedge fund in the world.<sup>22</sup> These are successful and influential leaders, and the impact of their example is sure to spread.

### The health benefits of mindfulness

However, in business, inspirational leadership is not enough. Companies need to see results. Meditation masters over the centuries have talked about how their practice enables them to cultivate mental and emotional qualities such as calmness, clarity, insight, and awareness, but until recently these qualities have not been measured. This has all changed with the scientific study of mindfulness, and particularly with the revolutions in cognitive science and behavioural neuroscience over the past 30 years. There is now a solid and rapidly growing body of scientific evidence for the benefits of mindfulness, and this is perhaps the most important driver behind the rapid growth of interest in mindfulness in the business world. “Mindfulness is an idea whose time has come,” says Chade-Meng Tan, founder of Google’s *Search Inside Yourself* program. “For a long time practitioners knew, but the science wasn’t there. Now the science has caught up.”<sup>23</sup>

Many organisations are basing their mindfulness programs on the

8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the Stress Reduction Clinic founded at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Over the past 30 years, hundreds of peer-reviewed papers have described how MBSR has a significant positive impact on health, well-being and quality of life in general,<sup>24</sup> and the health benefits are summarised by the UK Mental Health Foundation (MHF) as follows:<sup>25</sup>

- A 70 per cent reduction in anxiety
- Fewer visits to your doctor
- An ongoing reduction in anxiety three years after taking an MBSR course
- An increase in disease-fighting antibodies, suggesting improvements to the immune system
- Longer and better quality sleep, with fewer sleep disturbances
- A reduction in negative feelings like anger, tension and depression
- Improvements in physical conditions as varied as psoriasis, fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome.

The MHF concludes, “The evidence in support of MBSR is so strong that almost three-quarters of doctors think it would be beneficial for all patients to learn mindfulness meditation skills.” David Vago at the Harvard Medical School goes even further “I think we’re realizing that a lot of the ways that we conceptualize the healthcare system is going to change dramatically. Instead of thinking about meditation as an alternative method of healthcare, we’re just realizing now that meditation practice is just good medicine.”<sup>26</sup> For organisations, investments in mindfulness can be justified in terms of

the healthcare benefits alone. Stress in the workplace costs businesses an estimated \$2,800 per employee every year, and taking a mindfulness course at work reduces days off due to stress by up to 70% over three years, according to one study, in which a mindfulness course was offered to staff at Transport for London, the large company that runs the English capital’s subway network.<sup>27</sup> Convinced by this business case, 25% of large US companies have now launched ‘stress-reduction’ initiatives, according to the HR and outsourcing consultancy Aon Hewitt, and that number is growing steadily.<sup>28</sup>

### The broader benefits of mindfulness: emotional intelligence and personal effectiveness

In addition to its health benefits, mindfulness training enhances interpersonal relationships, develops emotional intelligence, increases resilience, enhances innovation and creativity, and improves working memory and attention.<sup>29</sup> The notion that we can improve our mental and emotional capacity is validated in a fairly new branch of science known as “neuroplasticity,” which is finding that what we think, do, and pay attention to changes the structure and function of our brains. “One very important implication of neuroplasticity,” says Chade-Meng Tan of Google, “is that we can intentionally change our brains with training.”<sup>30</sup> Many organisations are choosing to position their mindfulness programs in these broader terms of self-management, emotional intelligence and personal effectiveness, rather than solely as a means for stress reduction. We’ll look at three examples: Google’s *Search Inside Yourself* program,

Genentech's *Personal Excellence Programme*, and the *Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness Training* (MMFT) in the US Marine Corps.

### Google: Search Inside Yourself

Google's Chade-Meng Tan initially attempted to introduce mindfulness at Google with an MBSR program, but it didn't attract much attention. "Stress reduction didn't really fly here," he explains. "The hiring process at Google is designed to draw out high achievers and idealists who have done something a little different, like hiking in Patagonia or going to war-torn areas to help children. For high achievers, stress can be a badge of honour, and not many people will sign on for stress reduction, particularly those who need it the most. So I needed to go beyond stress reduction. I wanted to help people find ways to align mindfulness practice with what they want to achieve in life."<sup>31</sup> So mindfulness was repositioned as a workout for the heart and mind, something as normal and obviously beneficial as exercise, and the *Search Inside Yourself* (SIY) program was born. Building on the work of Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee and others,<sup>32</sup> it aims to cultivate the emotional intelligence skills that are a vital part of effective leadership.

SIY includes an introductory class, a full day of mindfulness practice, and six two-hour sessions, each a week apart. Class sizes range from twenty to fifty, and the program is offered both for open enrolment and for intact teams. The course begins with the "Neuroscience of Emotional Intelligence," which covers the growing body of scientific literature on the effects of training attention and

emotion. In addition to mindfulness training, the course includes instruction in journaling as a means of nonjudgmentally noticing mental content, mindful listening, walking meditation, mindful emailing, and a variety of other contemplative techniques. The latter stages of the course emphasize empathy using loving-kindness meditation, and social skills, including how to carry on difficult conversations.<sup>33</sup> The first SIY course ran from Octo-

**"We are seeing the birth of many new leadership models that emphasise the importance of mindfulness"**

ber to December in 2007, and it is now the highest-rated program at Google, with a 600-person waitlist. Google engineers have taken to the neuroscience-based approach, and affectionately refer to mindfulness training as "neural self-hacking" or "software development of the mind."<sup>34</sup> According to Mirabai Bush, senior fellow at the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, who helped design the program and has taught within it, "It's great when contemplative practice comes to any workplace, but it's particularly meaningful for Google, a fount of countless creative ideas. In many ways, Google is a model place to work; Fortune named it the best place to work in America two years in a row. And Google has had a big influence on all of our working lives. If it works at Google, other employers take notice."<sup>35</sup>

### Genentech: Personal Excellence Program

Another example of innovation comes from Genentech and its Personal Excellence Program (PEP). This mindfulness-based leadership development program won the 2012

HBR/McKinsey M-Prize for Management Innovation.<sup>36</sup> The story begins in 2002, when Todd Pierce took over as Genentech's CIO, and the employee satisfaction scores in the IT department were at rock bottom. He spent four years experimenting with the full menu of trainings, meetings, and competency models, but nothing seemed to work. He had development plans from 700 employees in the IT department, but "not one of them had an ounce of inspiration. I remember sitting there and saying, 'There's got to be another way.'"<sup>37</sup>

So he worked with executive coach and meditation teacher Pamela Weiss to design an experimental program that would dispense with the traditional skills based approach to leadership development and focus instead on helping people grow from the inside out. "If you want to transform an organization it's not about changing systems and processes so much as it's about changing the hearts and minds of people," says Weiss. "Mindfulness is one of the all-time most brilliant technologies for helping to alleviate human suffering and for bringing out our extraordinary potential as human beings." PEP has three phases, with mindfulness at their core: reflection on and selection of a specific quality or capacity you want to work on (patience, decisiveness, courage); three months of cultivating the capacity for self-observation; and the hard work of turning insight into deliberate, dedicated, daily practice. The impact has been transformational for individuals and organization alike. By 2010, four years into the program, the department ranked second in the company and is now consistently ranked among the best places to work in IT in the world, even after Genentech's 2009 merger with Roche. An independent



assessment of the program's impact found a 10-20% increase in employee satisfaction; 12% increase in customer satisfaction; and 50% increase in employee collaboration, conflict management, and communication.

### US Marine Corps: Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT)

Mindfulness is even entering one of the places where you might least expect to see Buddhist meditation: the US Marine Corps. The US Army has long recognised that combat is physically, mentally and emotionally draining<sup>38</sup> and that physical fitness is an essential prerequisite to handle these stresses. However, new kinds of combat stress are emerging that cannot be addressed by physical fitness alone. In February 2010, an attack by American helicopters in Afghanistan's central Uruzgan Province left 23 Afghan civilians dead. When military investigators looked into the attack, they found that the operator of a Predator drone had failed to pass along crucial information about the makeup of a gathering crowd of villagers. But Air Force and Army officials now say there was also an underlying cause for that mistake: information overload. At an Air Force base in Nevada, the drone operator and his team were trying to interpret what was going on in the village by monitoring the drone's video feeds while participating in dozens of instant-message and radio exchanges with intelligence analysts and troops on the ground. There was simply too much information, and the team determined, incorrectly, that the villagers' convoy posed an imminent threat, resulting in one of the worst losses of civilian lives in the war in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup>

According to Art Kramer, Professor of Neuroscience at the University of Illinois, "There is infor-

mation overload at every level of the military – from the general to the soldier on the ground." Michael Barnes, research psychologist at the Army Research Lab at Aberdeen, Md., acknowledges that "we're not going to improve the neurological capability" of soldiers. But he believes the military should not try to return to a less data-intensive age. "It would be like saying we shouldn't have automobiles because we have 40,000 people die on the roads each year," he says. "The pluses of technology are too great." So the military is trying novel approaches to help soldiers focus and manage the stress of information overload, including Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT, pronounced M-Fit). The program was founded by Elizabeth Stanley, a former Army intelligence officer who is now an assistant professor of security studies at Georgetown University. "The whole question we're asking is whether we can rewire the functioning of the attention system through mindfulness," she says.

M-Fit follows many features of Kabat-Zinn's MBSR protocol,<sup>40</sup> and it has been offered to US Marines who are undergoing stress inoculation training prior to combat deployment. Like MBSR, the course involves 24 hours of class instruction on mindfulness over 8 weeks, with weekly 2-hour meetings and a full-day silent retreat. It adds new modules on how to use mindfulness skills in a group context, integrate practices into the ongoing pre-deployment training, and apply these skills to counterinsurgency missions. M-Fit explains how mental fitness builds on the well-established importance of physical fitness for deployment readiness, and it includes a stress resilience skills section, which gives specific guidance on how to apply mindfulness to deal with physiological and psychological

symptoms following an experience of extreme stress.<sup>41</sup> As with other MBSR applications, the 8-week program has shown good results. It was found that the Marines' working memory capacity was boosted, improving their ability to handle large volumes of information, and there were beneficial effects on their capacity for emotion regulation and their levels of cognitive control.<sup>42</sup> "It's really hard to access rational thought during high-intensity stress situations," said Jared Smyser, 28, a former Marine who is training to become an M-Fit instructor. "All this stuff happens in your body because we've evolved to get away from predators. But it's not really relevant in today's warfare. You need to be calm, collected, making better decisions."<sup>43</sup> Maj. Jeff Davis, who went through the M-Fit program prior to deployment in Iraq in 2008, offers a typical reaction: "I had my doubts going in, but I'm a true believer now. The techniques were hard at first. It was like running – a few miles kills you at first, but then one day you realise you're just in better shape. It was the same with this."<sup>44</sup> In 2013, the Marines will incorporate M-Fit classes into an infantry school at Camp Pendleton, making the program a tentative part of its regular training cycle. "Longer term," says Elizabeth Stanley, "meditation may become as standard in the military as rifle practice, another way of making troops more effective and resilient."<sup>45</sup>

### Mindfulness in executive development

These three examples give a taste of the rapid growth of mindfulness-based training programs in organisations, and their number is growing rapidly as the benefits of mindfulness are more widely understood among leaders and HR executives. As awareness grows about the importance of

attention, mindfulness is also being incorporated into executive programs at several business schools including Harvard Business School, the Peter F. Drucker School of Management, IMD in Lausanne, and the University of Cape Town.<sup>46</sup> The Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University has set up the world's first executive program on Mindfulness for Enhanced Performance, which includes modules on mindful awareness, cognitive agility, mindful communications and management practices for enhancing mindfulness.<sup>47</sup> And the world of executive coaching is also embracing mindfulness. According to Douglas Riddle, Director of the Global Coaching Program at the Center for Creative Leadership, mindfulness offers a new paradigm for individual and organisational change, "a powerful alternative to the coercive and linear assumptions that have dominated our thinking." He believes that it could lead to radical improvements in the quality and impact of coaching, as "mindfulness practices prepare coaches to really help instead of just trying to be helpful."<sup>48</sup>

These are still very early days in the development of mindful leadership, a time of great creativity and innovation in the development and application of ideas and approaches. We are seeing the birth of many new leadership models that emphasise the importance of mindfulness, including Boyatzis & McKee's *Resonant Leadership*,<sup>49</sup> Kofman's *Conscious Business*,<sup>50</sup> Wilber's *Integral Leadership*,<sup>51</sup> Heifetz's *Adaptive Leadership*,<sup>52</sup> Scharmer's *Theory U*,<sup>53</sup> McKinsey's *Centred Leadership*,<sup>54</sup> and several varieties of mindful leadership<sup>55</sup> and authentic leadership.<sup>56</sup> The benefits of mindfulness have been proven for stress management, developing emotional intelligence and cultivat-

ing awareness and focus. And the business and financial impacts of less stressed, happier and more engaged employees are becoming harder for senior executives to ignore. As innovation in the organisational application of mindfulness continues and as best practices are established, it seems likely that the momentum towards more mindful leadership will continue to grow.

## 2 Mindfulness, ethics and wisdom

The enthusiasm for mindfulness is well justified, as its benefits are real and important. Most of us could benefit from paying more attention, being more present and savouring life more. Our workplaces and homes would be better places if we were more skilled at emotional self-regulation, so were not as negative and reactive when feeling stressed or criticised. Many of us would like to be able to show more patience and kindness to the people who matter most to us. And, as the positive psychology movement has reminded us, we could probably all benefit from cultivating more inner peace and appreciation of life.<sup>57</sup> But if we limit our understanding of mindfulness to this, then we will have missed the more profound role that mindfulness plays as a transformational path, and in particular its potential contribution to leadership development.

There is growing recognition of the challenges presented by the unprecedented pace of change, complexity, and turbulence of business in the 21st century. "Leaders tell us they are operating in a bewildering new environment in which little is certain," says Dominic Barton, Global Managing Director of McKinsey. "The tempo is quicker, and the dynamics are more complex. Leaders worry that it is impossible for

chief executives to stay on top of all the things they need to know to do their job. Some admit they feel overwhelmed."<sup>58</sup> There is a need for new approaches to leadership. Nick Petrie of the Center for Creative Leadership argues that it is no longer enough to come up with models of best practice, but instead we need to respond to "the development challenge – the process of how to grow "bigger" minds."<sup>59</sup> In particular, we need more than "horizontal development" of competencies and the incorporation of new information into existing frameworks. There needs to be greater emphasis on "vertical development" that fosters progression through developmental stages and results in transformational change of the leader's ways of knowing and being,<sup>60</sup> and this development needs to include the cultivation of ethics and wisdom. "Leaders who do not take time for introspection and reflection may be vulnerable to being seduced by external rewards, such as power, money, and recognition," says Bill George of Harvard Business School. "Or they may feel a need to appear so perfect to others that they cannot admit vulnerabilities and acknowledge mistakes. Some of the recent difficulties of Hewlett-Packard, British Petroleum, CEOs of failed Wall Street firms, and dozens of leaders who failed in the post-Enron era are examples of this."<sup>61</sup> The US Army has long placed an emphasis on developing leadership character in its BE, KNOW, DO approach to leadership (that is, character, competence and action),<sup>62</sup> and other organisations are realising the benefits of this approach. In terms of mindful leadership, this means broadening the focus from stress reduction and emotional intelligence to include questions of character, ethics and wisdom.

## Character & Ethics

The Oxford dictionary defines technology as the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes. Mindfulness is a technology of mind and emotion, both in its scientific basis and domain of application. And like any technology, mindfulness doesn't come with any built-in moral or ethical guidelines. While it is perhaps unfair to situate mindfulness alongside such self-evidently destructive technologies as assault rifles or nuclear weapons, there are nevertheless some risks. For instance, mindfulness might be used to equip people with greater calmness and focus even as they do something unethical. Elizabeth Stanley, designer of the US Army's M-Fit program, recalls, "A few people even wondered if I was trying to make, quote, 'better baby-killers.'"<sup>63</sup> Philosopher Slavoj Žižek raises a different concern, namely, that although mindfulness has been popularised as a remedy against the stress of modern life, "it actually functions as a perfect supplement to modern life."<sup>64</sup> Mindfulness allows people to decouple from stress, while potentially leaving the causes of the stress intact. These causes of stress include social and political issues such as injustice, inequity, and social exclusion, as well as economic issues and now, increasingly, global environmental and sustainable development issues. An unwise application of mindfulness solely to reduce stress might leave organisations and society as a whole in an undesirable situation where people only go as far as coping with unsatisfactory situations, rather than seeking to improve their outer conditions and environment. Echoing Marx's critique of religion, Žižek is concerned that mindfulness may

become the "opium of the people," ironically leaving us less mindful and less able to address the larger challenges and questions in our lives even as we become more mindful of the present moment. In a similar vein, journalist Richard Eskow warns that although "mindfulness and meditation can have a beneficial impact on individual health, that shouldn't be confused with wisdom."<sup>65</sup>

Of course, mindfulness, ethics and wisdom need not be contradictory, and indeed in the original Buddhist eightfold path they were taught together as indispensable components of a transformational path.<sup>66</sup> However, we are not yet seeing this

**"Mindfulness is a technology of mind and emotion, both in its scientific basis and domain of application"**

integrated approach commonly reflected in the application of mindfulness to leadership, perhaps out of a misguided concern that modern secular and scientific values might be compromised. This is a missed opportunity, not just in terms of transformational possibility of mindfulness, but because these questions are already part of the contemporary dialogue on leadership, although perhaps sometimes in different language. In modern secular terms, we need not choose to live by the monastic code of Theravada Buddhism, but many business leaders have spoken of the need to think deeply about values and ensure that actions remain aligned with intentions. Bill George of Harvard Business School feels a renewed focus on ethics and values is overdue, as "today's business leaders are so poorly trusted that they rank near the bottom of every poll. Looking back at the last decade, it's not hard to see why. The 2000s began with

the Enron scandal and ended with global financial market meltdowns."<sup>67</sup>

He has already started to bring together mindfulness and the values-orientation and integrity of authentic leadership, pointing out, "When you are mindful, you're aware of your presence and the ways you impact other people. You're able to both observe and participate in each moment, while recognizing the implications of your actions for the longer term. And that prevents you from slipping into a life that pulls you away from your values."<sup>68</sup>

## Wisdom

To do justice to the subject of wisdom would take us well beyond the scope of this article, as it has been a core concern of the great philosophical and spiritual traditions for thousands of years. However, one of most important findings of the Buddhist wisdom tradition is that there is no fixed or intrinsic identity to a person or to the phenomenal world.<sup>69</sup> This means that we can learn to become mindful and aware of how we see our surroundings and ourselves, and then change the way we see things, thus developing richer and more accurate maps of the world. As we develop richer and more accurate mental maps, our capacities for practical reasoning and intuition improve, opening up the possibility for us to make better – and wiser – decisions.<sup>70</sup>

Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, has written extensively on this kind of mindfulness, specifically about how we can become more mindful and aware of our mindsets, mental maps and narratives. She uses the term "mindlessness" to refer to the idea that much of what we believe to be rational thought is in fact just our brains on autopilot. She is particularly interested in how people arrange ob-

jects and experiences of similar types into categories. “Just as mindlessness is the rigid reliance on old categories,” she says, “mindfulness means the continual creation of new ones.”<sup>71</sup> This in turn requires openness to new information and awareness that there is always more than one possible perspective. She reaffirms the Buddhist notion that there is no intrinsic identity to phenomena, noting that “every idea, person or object is potentially simultaneously many things depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. A steer is a steak to a rancher, a sacred object to a Hindu, and a collection of genes and proteins to a molecular biologist.” Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh offers a more poetic description of the process: “For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them.”<sup>72</sup> Since there is no “correct” framing, the ability to choose the most appropriate and helpful framing in any situation becomes an essential leadership skill.

As leaders become more mindful and aware of the mindsets and mental models that influence their thoughts, emotions and behaviour, they gain more capacity in choosing which mindset to apply. This in turn increases their capability and choice in governing their actions and decisions. Peter Senge, Professor at MIT Sloan School of Management, has written about the importance of cultivating awareness of mental models in his groundbreaking book *The Fifth Discipline*.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Bob Kegan, Professor of Adult Learning at Harvard University, has laid out a model of cognitive development in which individuals grow by increasing their awareness of the mindsets and narratives they hold around things like how they see themselves as individu-

als, their values, and the purpose and meaning of their lives.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, Bill Torbert, Professor of Management at the Carroll School of Management at Boston College, argues that what

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differentiates leaders is not so much their philosophy of leadership, their personality, or their style of management. Rather, “it’s their internal “action logic”—how they interpret their surroundings and react when their power or safety is challenged.”<sup>75</sup>

Ron Heifetz, Co-founder of the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, has perhaps come closest to a leadership perspective that incorporates the mindfulness of mindsets. “Few practical ideas are more obvious or more critical than the need to get perspective in the midst of action,” he writes with his colleague Marty Linsky. “Buddhists call it “karma yoga,” or mindfulness. We call this skill “getting off the dancefloor and going to the balcony,” an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, “What’s going on here?”<sup>76</sup> If they are to avoid simply getting swept up in the flow of events, leaders need to be able to move back and forth between the balcony and dancefloor. They need to make interventions and observe their impact in real time, and then return to the action. Heifetz and Linsky talk about this as “reflective practice,” where the goal is to come as close as possible to being in both places simultaneously, “as if you had one eye looking from the dance floor and one eye looking down from the balcony, watching all

the action, including your own. This is a critical point: When you observe from the balcony, you must see yourself as well as the other participants. Perhaps this is the hardest task of all – to see yourself objectively.” Developing the capacity to see oneself objectively, especially in real time, is indeed

a very hard task. However, for over 2500 years the mindfulness and wisdom traditions have developed and refined ways to cultivate this capacity, and their relevance and importance for leadership has never been greater.

In summary, mindset-based approaches to leadership development are becoming increasingly influential. However, there is not yet widespread use of practices from the mindfulness and wisdom traditions to develop real-time, “on the balcony and in the dance,” awareness of these mindsets. Furthermore, work on mindsets has not yet been integrated with the mindfulness-based approach to leadership coming from Jon Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR tradition. This opens up a fertile opportunity to develop a new generation of tools and approaches for mindful leadership.

### **Mindfulness: an integrated approach**

We have seen that there are two approaches to mindfulness in the Western scientific tradition: Jon Kabat-Zinn’s approach of paying attention to physical sensations, emotions and thoughts in the present moment; and Ellen Langer’s approach of paying attention to our mindsets, which in turn frame our relationship to our sensations, emotions and thoughts. These two forms of mindfulness are related to the two selves outlined by Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, “the experiencing self, which does the liv-



ing, and the remembering self, which keeps score and makes the choices.”<sup>77</sup> Both are important to our happiness and success. By taking an integrated approach that combines both forms of mindfulness, we come full circle to the original teaching by the Buddha in the Satipatthana sutta.<sup>78</sup> In that text, mindfulness isn’t seen as a unitary phenomenon, but rather as an awareness operating at four different levels: body, feelings, thoughts, and dhammas. The fourth level, which is based on the Pali word ‘dhammas,’ may be translated as ‘phenomena.’<sup>79</sup> Just as in Ellen Langer’s work, Mahayana Buddhism holds that the phenomena we see and experience are determined by our mindsets. So an integrated approach to mindful leadership would include

mindfulness of body, feelings, thoughts and mindsets. Many of the necessary elements are already in place, and the development of tools and approaches that incorporate the four foundations of mindfulness offers an exciting agenda for the future of mindful leadership and transformational leadership programs.

**“As we develop richer and more accurate mental maps, our capacities for practical reasoning and intuition improve, opening up the possibility for us to make better – and wiser – decisions”**

## Conclusion

Mindful leadership is emerging from a hugely creative encounter between Buddhism and modern science that has been underway for more than 30 years. It offers powerful, evidence-based

methods to reduce stress, develop emotional intelligence and increase personal effectiveness. Leading organisations such as Google, Genentech and the US Army have confirmed the benefits of cultivating greater mindfulness in the workplace, and awareness is spreading to executives in other organisations.

Meanwhile, innovative work is being done at the frontiers of leadership development to integrate mindfulness into new ways of building transformational leadership.

Although much has already been accomplished, the dialogue between Buddhism, science and leadership is still in its infancy. There is every reason to look forward to a much bigger role for mindful leadership in the years ahead. ■

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