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Mindfulness as a Disruptive Approach to Leader Development

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Introduction

Mindfulness has soared in popularity over the last decade. Commonly defined as present moment attention and awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), advances in psychological and medical research have enabled mindfulness to go mainstream. More recently, interest in mindfulness as a tool for leaders in the workplace has emerged. The predominant discourse on workplace mindfulness emphasizes shortened versions of contemplative practices such as meditation. However, having worked with thousands of leaders through coaching and executive education programs, the authors have found that specific non-contemplative mindfulness techniques can also be effective, while potentially appealing to a wider audience. These techniques help leaders disrupt instances in which automatic thoughts and behaviors limit effectiveness. Like any construct borrowed from other social sciences, mindfulness is best leveraged in leader development by considering the contexts of leaders, including their interests and challenges. This article offers a disruptive approach to using mindfulness for leader development that emphasizes analyzing automatic routines, shifting attention to the five senses, and mindful thinking.

Mindfulness in the Context of Leader Development

Most leaders are overworked and stretched thin. This is typically accompanied by stress, which can hinder overall

performance. Perhaps this is a reason for the growing interest in mindfulness at work (Gelles, 2015; Good et al., 2016). Contemplative mindfulness practices (e.g., sitting meditation, walking meditation, yoga, tai chi) tend to involve exercises exploring the nature of self and reality. They can be highly effective across a range of human functioning, including improvements to stress, attention, emotion, cognition, and physiology (Good et al., 2016). Programs such as Jon Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR), with prolonged periods of meditation multiple times a day, have provided successful alternatives to previously accepted stress reduction treatments. Perhaps as a result of such successes, mindfulness applications for leader development have predominantly focused on wellness and stress management. There are several arguments to be made for extending mindfulness-based leader development approaches beyond contemplative practices primarily focused on stress reduction and wellbeing.

First, many leaders are less likely to practice contemplative exercises than one would hope. Reasons for this range, including time limitations, fixed identities (“meditation isn’t my thing”), perceived susceptibility levels (“it never works for me”), and negative associations (“another new age fad”). The reluctance to engage in formal contemplative practices reflects the mindsets of many leaders. As a result, limiting mindfulness tools to contemplative practices may unnecessarily narrow the population of

leaders who benefit from becoming more mindful. It certainly limits the wider range of mindfulness applications in leader development.

Second, contemplative practices in the workplace primarily target stress reduction and wellbeing. The widespread emphasis on wellness may result in missed opportunities to interest leaders in mindfulness when their primary goals differ from topics such as stress reduction. An alternative is to focus on mindfulness as a tool for intentionality. Being overworked and stretched thin not only leads to stress but can also result in an over reliance on automatic activity. Automatic activity often leads to fewer intentional choices, which can be a problem for leaders seeking to change behavior. Fortunately, many leaders desire to improve work performance and would like to be more intentional in thoughts and behaviors. They may not label this interest as a desire to be more mindful, but mindfulness seems to be what they would like more of. In the authors' experiences working with organizations, more leaders are willing to engage in practices targeting being intentional than practices targeting stress reduction. This is particularly the case when leaders conceptually link being intentional to achieving work goals. The question then becomes, how can non-contemplative mindfulness practices directly help leaders to think and behave more intentionally? Such a question is interesting, as it may lead to different answers than a question about how mindfulness improves health and wellbeing. By focusing on intentionality, more leaders will benefit from mindfulness practices, in a wider variety of ways.

Mindlessness and the Nature of Autopilot

Intentionality requires a way to disrupt automatic thoughts and/or behaviors. Like any effective leader development approach, successfully using mindfulness to help leaders requires a focused plan based on the leader's interests (Good, Yeganeh, & Yeganeh, 2013; Rogers, 1951). Prior to exploring disruptive mindfulness

practices, it helps to consider the nature of mindlessness.

We spend the majority of our day in a state of automaticity, or functioning automatically (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice; 1998). In mindfulness teachings, automaticity is commonly referred to as being on *autopilot*, or in a state of *mindlessness*. Autopilot describes when we think and behave in unaware ways. Usually when introducing this concept to leaders, they quickly assume that acting automatically is a universally "bad" phenomenon. This may be because the word "mindless" is commonly associated with pejorative meanings. However, being mindless is neither universally "good" nor "bad." It is a natural part of being human. Being in an automatic state is how we cope with limited attentional resources in a world filled with seemingly endless stimuli. For example, as you read this article, you do not need to focus on which direction you scan these words or how to sit in your chair. That would be a waste of brainpower and energy. Automatic thoughts and behaviors can be helpful or unhelpful. The key is for leaders to identify critical times in which thinking and acting automatically is growing vs. limiting their potential. In order to change deeply ingrained behaviors, leaders need to move beyond competencies and labels, towards analyses of autopilot patterns.

Authors' note: In our work we meet leaders who are very strong in a variety of areas. Some are relationship savvy, which helps them along in their careers. However, these same leaders may need to better assert themselves around strong personalities or focus on another area of development. Others will never back down from a fight, which helps them stand up to strong personalities but doesn't necessarily help them grow their talent. The key is to identify an autopilot routine and how it hinders performance, as a means of setting up mindfulness practices.

When Autopilot is Helpful

Understanding when automaticity is working well is important in leader development. Many automatic thoughts and behaviors help us to survive and thrive (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). In fact, most successful leaders display at least some automatic behaviors that work well for them. They typically internalize successful work behaviors to address recurring situations. In addition to work effectiveness, behaving automatically preserves resources and makes the world more predictable. It enables us to save energy for new situations by reducing energy spent on the things we do every day. This is a fundamental element of human learning (Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009).

When Autopilot is Problematic

Autopilot becomes problematic for leaders when they engage in routine thoughts and behaviors that get in the way of desired outcomes. For example, imagine that a leader wishes to ask more thoughtful and open-ended questions while coaching a direct report. As the scenario arises and the direct report presents a problem he is dealing with, the leader falls back into a pattern of providing solutions and instructing rather than helping him to think through critical issues for himself. This creates a bottleneck in which more and more problems are brought to the leader by the direct report. Eventually the direct report feels disempowered and unmotivated. Simultaneously, the leader experiences stress and resentment for being over involved in the minutia of the direct report's day-to-day work. Autopilot has a negative impact here because the leader is triggered to solve problems, which supersedes the desired intentional behavior of asking open-ended questions. Solution-providing behaviors like this often emerge automatically in conversations. They are not a result of malicious intent; rather they happen because automatic reactions are difficult to change. It just so happens that in this context, they were less helpful than alternative behaviors. Leading effectively requires responding to tasks, people, and resources. When not fully paying attention to the present moment we risk making

mistakes by missing subtle, and not so subtle cues to act intentionally. Essentially we repeat what we are used to doing.

Automaticity can also negatively impact the way we think. Psychologists have clearly identified common cognitive distortions that people automatically engage in to varying degrees (Beck, 1975). For example, we have all engaged in *catastrophic thinking* by making events seem much more problematic and fateful than they actually are. *Fortune-telling* or worrying about a negative future event is another example of cognitively distorting reality. Worrying about things can hinder the ability to manage and influence. It distracts us from what we need to do, limits our abilities to plan, and creates negative spirals of anxiety and stress.

Keep in mind, automaticity can be deceptive. Generally, we do not realize how automatic our thoughts and/or behaviors are in a given moment. Instead, being on autopilot manifests in ways that feel very natural, and those natural feelings are largely missed as they shift into the background of our experiences. For leaders, mindlessness can include preferring a person, place, or thing, believing something that feels emotionally right, feeling defensive or proud, and/or fixating on a future objective.

Disruptive Mindfulness Practices

Practicing mindfulness in order to be more intentional requires disrupting autopilot thoughts and/or behaviors. Keep in mind that useful practices will differ based on individual and situational differences. Defining mindfulness as present moment attention and awareness allows for numerous supportive practices for disruption.

The following techniques are adapted from various mindfulness approaches but do not require contemplation into the nature of self or reality. They include attention-based adaptations of traditional contemplative practices along with specific mindfulness based cognitive practices. All of the suggestions below are aligned with what mindfulness thought leaders have broadly described as mindfulness in

everyday living (Kabat Zinn, 1994; Nhat Hanh, 2010) (See *Table 1*).

Table 1. Disruptive Mindfulness Practices for Leader Development

1. Identify Autopilot Routines.
2. Shift from Thinking to the Five Senses.
Notice Your Environment.
Be Mindful of Sensations.
3. Engage in Mindful Thinking.
Practice Mindful Acceptance.
Shift from Worrying to Caring.

Mindful Practice: Identify Autopilot Routines

Leaders start by better understanding when and how their autopilot thoughts and behaviors are impacting how they lead. This can be done in different ways. Creating a list of workplace scenarios in which one tends to be automatic is a useful start. For example a leader may recognize that weekly meetings tend to be very repetitive. During these meetings the leader's autopilot routine may be to multi-task and lose track of what meeting participants are saying. Other examples of common scenarios that leaders identify include networking opportunities, negotiations, difficult conversations, performance reviews, providing feedback, and collaborating with other departments.

It is suggested that leaders suspend any impulse they may have to generate alternative thoughts and behaviors during this practice. The purpose is to fully explore autopilot scenarios (see *Table 2*), including what leaders are thinking and doing and what is happening in the environment. Repetitive events are usually ripe opportunities for disruption. Exploring autopilot routines is a helpful first step to deciding which mindfulness practices best suit a leader.

Mindful Practice: Shift from Thinking to the Five Senses

One of the primary ways that mindfulness aids in disruption is by shifting attention. Our brains take in information in two distinct ways (Kolb, 1984). One way is through abstract thinking, which includes symbols such as words and numbers, as well as images. The other is perception, which occurs through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. The interplay between abstract thinking and perception helps us learn. However, during times of mindlessness we tend to be stuck in abstract thought. This can include having self-defeating thoughts ("I'm not doing well enough in my role"), snap judgments, and thinking negatively about the future/past. There is no way to outthink our thoughts. However, it is possible to redirect attention from abstract thoughts to the five senses to disrupt automatic thinking. A metaphor of clearing the cache

Table 2. Exploring Autopilot Routines

It can be argued that a major leadership challenge is to be intentional rather than automatic during key moments of impact. Useful questions for the leader include:

- » When does being on autopilot help my effectiveness?
- » How does being on autopilot help my effectiveness?
- » When does being on autopilot hinder my effectiveness?
- » How does being on autopilot hinder my effectiveness?
- » How do my automatic thoughts and behaviors impact me, my team, my organization?
- » What is the risk of continuing these thoughts/behaviors?
- » What would be the benefit of changing these thoughts/behaviors?

Authors' note: Our hunting and gathering ancestors honed the five senses in order to survive. These days we are far more engaged in abstract thinking than ever before. Natural moments in which the brain once focused on the five senses, seem to have been replaced by abstract activities like thinking about accomplishing outcomes, taking in information through social media, juggling priorities, balancing deadlines, focusing on smart phones, and so on. Further, the more stressed we become about past and (potential) future events, the more likely we are to be thinking abstractly rather than noticing concrete experiences through any of the five senses.

of a computer when the RAM is slowing down comes to mind. Such a reset unlocks new options for thinking and acting. There are many ways to engage the five senses to disrupt autopilot. Two examples are provided below focusing on awareness and sensations.

Take a moment to notice your environment. The busier we are, the more likely we are to ignore our surroundings. We particularly neglect our environments in routine settings (Langer, 1989). The more used to something we are, the easier it is to overlook it. One technique to address this is searching for the things that we have ignored in our physical environments and tending to them. It does not matter what we perceive during this exercise, it matters that we are perceiving at all. An example of this is shifting attention to the table surface that your computer rests upon. One may start to notice new details emerge such as grain patterns and light reflections. These are just some of the stimuli that we normally overlook. If visual concentration is distracting to certain leaders, they may benefit from focusing on sounds or other senses instead. Leaders are encouraged to experiment to learn what works best for them. Practices like this help to build capacity to be present and anchor the mind when it counts (e.g., during an important conversation at work). They also enable us to disrupt unproductive thought streams and focus our attention when it unintentionally drifts.

Be mindful of sensations. Another useful practice is to notice physical sensations. For example until reading this sentence you were probably unaware on how the chair feels beneath you. We literally ignore such stimuli all of the time. Similarly, human beings take about 20,000 breaths per day while not mindfully experiencing any of them. Suggestions include focusing on how a single breath feels during inhalation and exhalation, or noticing how you are sitting or standing and making mindful posture adjustments. Being mindful of sensations is an example of how focusing the five senses can serve as a disruptive tool to hone attention into the present moment. (See Table 3.)

It is worth noting that these are active practices requiring purposeful concentration. These are not trivial or passive exercises. Intentionally engaging the senses is a powerful way to shape how we pay attention to the present moment.

**Mindful Practice:
Engage in Mindful Thinking**

Like most people, leaders are constantly thinking. Some mindfulness practices help leaders accept what may be happening in a given moment to unlock new options for thinking and acting. Other practices help leaders think productively by replacing unproductive thoughts with enabling thoughts.

Practice mindful acceptance. Successful leaders manage complex environments by simultaneously responding to multiple variables. When it comes down to it, decisions are made in order to control the world and shape the future. However, the desire to control can result in being hyper-reactive, which can lead to unanticipated and unsuccessful outcomes. Acceptance of the moment is a transformational component of mindfulness practices. It is quite distinct from apathy. Apathy is defined by not caring while acceptance describes an alternative to overreacting to the current moment. Acceptance helps leaders to be intentional about reactions. The notion of acceptance in mindfulness has revolutionized the field of clinical psychology, teaching us that individuals

resisting their experiences are less able to change than individuals who accept their experiences.

Leaders seek to control things for multiple reasons. One reason is that they are rewarded for having an impact at work, and this requires controlling for specific outcomes. Emotionally, they seek control to reduce anxiety and create a sense of predictability and permanence in a complex world. Moreover, leaders may falsely credit their successes to over controlling behaviors. Unfortunately attempting to constantly control the environment can result in high stress. Furthermore, rigid controlling behaviors can actually reduce the amount of control that one has on the environment. An example of this is when leaders react negatively to people at work (see Case: Mindful Leadership and Acceptance).

Shift from worrying to caring. Leaders benefit from distinguishing differences between worrying and caring about something. When we care about someone or something we are doing things to advance the interests of that person or thing (LeJune, 2007). Caring has to do

Table 3. *Shifting the Five Senses*

Examples of shifting to the five senses include:

- » Focusing on the tone and pitch of someone's voice.
- » Seeing clothing textures.
- » Focusing on the feeling of a pen in the hand.
- » Calm breathing while reviewing emails.
- » Noticing how coffee smells.
- » Focusing on the taste of food.
- » Searching a conference room for things you have not noticed before.
- » Concentrating on how the chair feels against your back.
- » Noticing someone's facial expressions as they speak.
- » Noticing your breathing during conversations.

Case: Mindful Leadership and Acceptance

A mindful leader understands when the need for control is causing more harm than good. I recently worked with a group of executives who were seeking mindfulness techniques to be more intentional. During one of the programs, a very smart and experienced business person challenged the notion of mindful acceptance. He asked, “I know a guy who constantly wastes time in meetings thinking out loud in a disorganized way and I can’t stand it. I get angry whenever I’m around him. Are you telling me that I should just accept that I’m angry at him and my problems will go away?” I asked him what happens when he is angry in the meetings, and he replied that he feels tension in his chest. I asked how he behaves in the meeting and he responded that he tends to zone out. I then asked him why he is so angry with this person who happens to ramble in an unaware state. He replied that it is because he selfishly wastes everyone’s time. I asked him why having his time wasted makes him angry. He replied that he already has enough on his plate and too little time for his family as is, and when this person wastes his time it is directly hurting his personal life. This was a key insight. I asked, “So a socially unaware person who rambles is responsible for damaging your personal life?” He nodded in acknowledgment that there was something messy about that causal belief. This is an example of how cognitive distortions distort reality. It is also an example of how natural an anger reaction can feel. A common cognitive distortion is the tendency to personalize people and events. After uncovering the source of anger, we discussed practicing acceptance of his anger during meetings. Instead of zoning out and rehearsing angry thoughts, one option is to think, “I am angry right now and it is okay to be upset from time to time given how much I have on my plate.” This is very different from thoughts such as, “I can’t believe this idiot is wasting my time again. He has ruined my day again.” After accepting the anger, the leader can then decide how to handle the situation effectively by addressing the underlying issue.

In this particular case, the underlying issue was time-management, which is far easier to address than a person’s disposition toward rambling in meetings. Once the focus of our workshop conversation shifted to how the meeting can be better managed to respect peoples’ time, numerous options for improvement were generated in the room. Suggestions ranged from reaching out to the meeting leader offline to share some observations and think through ways to create more efficient meetings to having meeting participants individually reflect on specific questions and then take turns sharing with the room as a way to create equal speaking times. Another technique offered to handle dominating talkers was to assign roles of time-keeper, facilitator, and note taker to group members, rotating roles every meeting so members collaboratively manage time. There are many strategies to employ once a business problem such as meeting inefficiency is identified.

with intentional planning and action. In terms of abstract thinking, this can mean focusing on a list of action steps and precautions that are formulated to address the core issue. This is quite distinct from ruminating or automatically thinking about something in an anxious way. The latter hurts us in terms of physical health, and it reduces the ability to meet our goals head on. Some anxiety is healthy, however when leaders spend valuable time and energy worrying, it helps for them to recognize and disrupt the moment by shifting to a caring mindset. Identifying the differences between worry thoughts and behaviors and caring thoughts and behaviors can be powerful. Leaders are encouraged to summarize their caring mindsets into short mantras that are easy to remember and recall throughout the day.

A key takeaway is that there is a difference between reacting with emotion and planning. Accepting your emotions is the first step to getting unstuck, followed by exploration, and determining the best options to successfully adapt to the environment. Keep in mind that when we are upset, the discomfort with and judgment of our negative emotions adds additional layers of stress and keeps us stuck in routines. Alternatively, when we accept the present moment, we let go of these additional layers of stress. This enables us to better think through the best way to proceed. Acceptance can mistakenly sound like giving away control but when practiced mindfully it supports leaders in creating successful outcomes.

Applying Mindfulness Techniques

Awareness of automatic routines should inform selection of customized mindfulness practices that will disrupt those routines. Leaders who select options based on who they are and the environments they are in are more likely to practice techniques and see results. They should be prepared to engage in desired thoughts and/or behaviors that will accompany the disrupted autopilot routine. Specific desired thoughts and behaviors are more likely to be achieved than vague or abstract notions. Also, it is helpful to

create mindfulness practice reminders in the forms of calendar entries, symbols on the desk, mantras and anything else, are very helpful. Further, the approaches offered in this article can be integrated into most leader development and coaching frameworks.

Summary

This article has offered a disruptive approach to using mindfulness for leader development that emphasizes analyzing automatic routines, shifting attention to the five senses and mindful thinking. It has been suggested that leaders will improve their chances of success by considering their unique dispositions and the environments in which they work to find best-suited disruptive mindfulness practices. We are still in the early stages of understanding how mindfulness can be leveraged in support of leader development. Creative exploration, practice, and research will continue to advance knowledge in this area.

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