MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

ACHIEVING RESULTS BY MANAGING THE MIND

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Leaders today face an increasing amount of pressure to do more with less and get more done in less time. They are confronted with an increasingly complex, ever-changing business landscape, are expected to be always-on, and are often overloaded with information. In addition, they have to face these challenges in work environments that are filled with distractions. We like to refer to this as the PAID reality, standing for Pressured, Always-on, Information Overloaded, and Distracted.

In our experience, leaders who allow themselves to be a victim of the PAID reality do not do well. They are often overwhelmed, overworked, stressed, and ineffective in leading their people and delivering results. Quite often the reason for their poor performance is that they respond to the PAID reality by going on autopilot and simply trying to do more, run faster, or work longer just to keep up.

In our view, the way to succeed in a PAID reality is not by speeding up. The key to enhancing leadership performance and well-being in today’s fast-paced work environments is by slowing down. It is about ensuring we are doing the right things as opposed to just lots of things. It is about ensuring we are managing not just our activities but also our mind and remaining focused, calm, and clear even in demanding business environments.

We believe the key to becoming a successful leader in the PAID reality starts with learning to understand and manage your thoughts. This gives you the ability to take a one-second pause to respond to situations as opposed to reacting on autopilot. Mindfulness training is an ancient technique designed to help enhance focus and awareness. When skillfully applied to today’s demanding leadership context, it can be the key to enhance performance, well-being, and greater results. It starts with understanding the nature of our attention.

The Attention Economy

Work life has changed radically over the past few decades. We used to have working conditions in which
our attention could more easily focus on the task at hand. We now experience distractions and information overload all the time. Our cell phones, tablets, e-mails, texts, and the like place continual demands on our attention. (See Figure 1.)

According to the former director of the Accenture Institute of Strategic Change and coauthor of the book *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Tom Davenport, “Understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success.” We are living in an “attention economy” in which the ability to manage our attention and the quality of our attention is key to our success as leaders. But in the PAID reality, where our ability to pay attention at will is under siege, we have a problem.

How big is this problem? Researchers studying the mind’s natural tendency to wander calculated that on average our mind wanders 46.9 percent of the time. In other words, while we are at work, 53.1 percent of the time our mind is on task. The rest of the time it’s off task. From a leadership perspective there is a lot of potential to be developed here. Even just a small increase in “on-task” time could have a significant improvement in many aspects of leadership, including productivity, leadership effectiveness, employee satisfaction, teamwork, and anything else that would benefit from more focused attention.

Attention wandering is a natural neurological tendency. But in the *Harvard Business Review* article, “Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform,” researcher Edward Hallowell outlines the fact that attention wandering has increased drastically over the past few decades because of the challenges of the PAID reality. Specifically, he concluded that “modern office life and an increasingly common condition called attention deficit trait are turning steady executives into frenzied underachievers.”

Attention is indeed a new variable of economy in business and certainly in leadership. McKinsey outlines why in the *McKinsey Quarterly* article “Recovering from Information Overload,”: “. . . Attention fragmentation hit CEOs and their colleagues in the C-suite particularly hard because senior executives so badly need to synthesize information from many different sources, reflect on its implications for the organization, apply judgment, make trade-offs, and arrive at good decisions.”

*Work life has changed radically over the past few decades.*
Traditionally, business productivity has been enhanced through time management, goal setting, prioritization skills, and general qualifications. Attention, in the PAID reality, is becoming a new foundational skill of leadership and business performance. Welcome to the attention economy.

But the big question is whether we as leaders, facing the PAID reality, are destined to experience attention wandering with resulting underperformance? Are we destined to have minds that often wander and lose focus?

Thankfully, the answer is no. Attention can be trained and strengthened. It’s much like a muscle. We can enhance our attentiveness to the task at hand or people we are leading. Mindfulness is the method. And make no mistake, mindfulness is no touchy-feely, New Age concept. Based on thousands of years of development, mindfulness is a rigorous practice of enhancing focus and clarity of mind while opening the eyes to the potential in ourselves and the world. It is a practice of mental high performance, and in many ways a long-awaited answer to the challenges of today’s fast-paced and information-overloaded leadership reality.

**Mindfulness and the Attention Economy**

Training our minds is possible. Decades of research shows that our brains are changeable. It’s called neuroplasticity. In short, the way we use our brain is the way we reshape it. Any action we do or thought we think is creating neural pathways in our brain and becomes easier to repeat. The brain is changing according to how we use it. This means we are not predefined by what we are now, but rather we *are* recreating ourselves by what we *do* now. This means that every moment we spend with a focused and clear mind, focus and clarity become traits of our brain. In the context of the attention economy, this means we are not destined to have a wandering mind. We can train ourselves and gain high levels of attention, focus, and clarity of mind and thereby become better leaders of our own lives and the people we lead.

Mindfulness involves entering the attention economy and being able to manage your wandering mind and external distractions. But the practice has an impressive list of research proven by-products including stronger immune system, lower blood pressure, reduced stress, better sleep, improved cognitive function, enhanced focus and awareness, increased job satisfaction, better work-life balance, enhanced creativity, and better overall quality of life.

Realizing benefits from mindfulness requires formal training that can be viewed as going to the gym for the mind. Instructions on a formal mindfulness training are presented in the sidebar. Our approach to mindfulness training includes helping individuals enhance focus and awareness—critical skills for today’s leaders. Focus is about training the mind to maintain sharp focus on a particular task, with minimal distraction, for a long as you want, with minimal effort. Awareness is about training the mind to be open and see clearly what is happening internally and externally and make wise choices about where to focus your attention.
INSTRUCTIONS FOR DAILY MINDFULNESS TRAINING

A formal daily mindfulness training is the backbone of cultivating greater understanding of the inner workings of your mind and learning how to manage it to enhance performance, effectiveness, and well-being. We recommend spending ten minutes a day, Monday to Friday, incorporating this daily training into your routine just like brushing your teeth. In general the morning is the best time for most, but it can be done at any time that suits you best.

The training has four pillars: anatomy, breathing, counting, and dealing with distractions.

ANATOMY
- Sit comfortably on a chair. Feet on the ground. In balance. Keep a straight back.
- Relax your neck, shoulders, and arms.
- Close your eyes and breathe through your nose.

BREATHING
- Direct your full attention to the experience of your breath at your nose.
- Observe it neutrally, without trying to control it. Like watching waves coming to and leaving the shore.
- In a relaxed manner, continually monitor the experience of your breath.

COUNTING
- To help your focus staying with the breath, count one count at the end of each exhalation.
- When you reach up to ten, start counting backward down to one.
- Count back and forward like this.
- If you lose your count, start at one again.

DISTRACTIONS
- Distractions are everything that is not the breath. Sounds, thoughts, bodily sensations, and so on.
- Any distraction is like a helping friend, telling you that you are off track and not with the breath anymore.
- Whenever you encounter a distraction, acknowledge it and return your attention to your breath.

An app can be a great tool to get you guided through the practice. Search for The Potential Project Mindfulness in your app store.
As illustrated in Figure 2, sharp focus is the opposite of being distracted. And the opposite of open awareness is to be on autopilot, not having awareness of where you direct your focus. These mind states can be combined into a matrix.

In the first quadrant you are focused but on autopilot. Your state of mind can be described as being absorbed. It often happens spontaneously when we do routine tasks or run, swim, or do other monotonous activities. The risk of the absorbed state is that we lack awareness. In leadership, lack of awareness can mean the difference between picking up on an employee’s stress signals and pushing too far. Or not noticing your own stress, for that matter.

In the fourth quadrant, you are aware but easily distracted. There can be benefits to loosening focus and allowing random thoughts to bubble up. Some people find that they come up with more creative ideas in this quadrant. But if your mind is too distracted, you’ll have difficulty retaining any good ideas. Good ideas only become innovative solutions when you have the focus to retain and execute them in the second quadrant.

In the third quadrant, you’re neither focused nor aware. You are mindless. And it is not even a relaxing state to be in because your mind is continually engaged in random activities and thoughts. Not much good can be said about it.

In the second quadrant you are mindful. This is where you are performing at your best. It is the sweet spot for clarity, presence, attention, and many other qualities of effective leadership. It is a useful response to the PAID reality and the relentless stream of distractions in the attention economy. Sharp focus and open awareness are beneficial skills for anyone at any level of an organization, but they are particularly important for leadership.

**Mindful Leadership**

In our view, mindfulness is a foundational skill for effective leadership. Mindfulness is about developing high levels of self-management by switching off the autopilot and getting in the driver’s seat of your life. Mindfulness also cultivates the ability to be more aware of others, which is a cornerstone for leading people and leading an organization. Peter Drucker said that we can’t manage others unless we learn to manage ourselves first.

To explore the value of mindfulness for leaders further, we share a story from our experience with the CEO of a large consumer goods company in Europe. Similar
to many executives we work with, she complained about the challenges of today’s business context and the difficulty of keeping up. She noted that in the past couple of years, she had started working long hours and had stopped exercising. She lamented that the company’s performance was not where it needed to be. Employee engagement was at an all-time low and her leadership team was overloaded, frustrated, and lacked drive.

When we asked her what she thought was at the root of the problem, she focused on external factors such as the competitive landscape, changing technology, employee performance, and the like. When we asked her how she felt about the challenges she was facing, she changed the subject. When we asked her again about her feelings she became quite frustrated. She said she had no time or interest in exploring her feelings—she had a business to run!

She is not alone in not wanting to explore the inner workings of the mind and how these affect our ability to be effective. The PAID reality pulls our minds toward the third quadrant of the matrix, that is, distractedness and autopilot. Many senior leaders go through their day not in tune with what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they, and others around them, are feeling. They are busy getting a lot done and rushing from meeting to meeting or plow-driving through a relentless stream of e-mails, but are they achieving results? Are they focused and aware of how they are leading themselves and their staffs?

We have created a framework for mindful leadership—inspired by Daniel Goleman’s model for emotional intelligence—that helps to explain the challenges many leaders face and how they can be overcome. The framework looks at what the cultivation of mindfulness—that is, high focus and awareness—enables for self and others and, subsequently, what that enables in terms of leadership.

Impactful leadership begins with mindfulness as defined in quadrant 2 of Figure 3. This is where we have strong focus and open awareness directed toward

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**FIGURE 3. MINDFUL LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK**

The brain is changing according to how we use it.
Being a leader can often feel like battling a hurricane every day. Things never stand still. Everything is in movement. The two options we are left with are to either tame the hurricane or to tame ourselves. As we know, hurricanes can’t be tamed. But our minds can. Taming our minds to have greater focus, calm, and clarity, even in the midst of daily busyness, is the essence of mindful leadership. It is the starting point for significant change in how you manage yourself and others. If you want to achieve more of your potential as a leader and in life, the best place to start is with your mind. Why not give it a try?

our own self. It enables us as individuals to be calm and clear-minded in how we think and behave. In this state, we mindfully monitor our thoughts and emotions and use our values and goals to guide our actions. This mind state is a prerequisite for everything else.

As we are developing greater self-awareness we are simultaneously cultivating the ability to have greater empathy for others. Once we can see and understand our own struggles and challenges, we have a greater ability to recognize those in people around us. Therefore, moving from a high degree of mindfulness of self toward mindfulness of others is a natural transition.

Once we have developed a high level of self-awareness, it is also very easy to move down in the framework toward effective self-leadership. This is where we have the discipline to focus on the right things and take the time to know what those right things are. Specifically, the “right things” come from tuning in with your authentic self and having a high degree of integrity in everything you do.

Once we have the foundations of mindfulness of self and others as well as leadership of self, leadership of others becomes much easier. In particular, if you take these skills as the foundation and introduce strategic and tactical management tools and techniques such as defining vision and strategy and applying situational leadership you have a pretty robust framework for success. And the more you cultivate these skills in your leadership of others the greater your capacity for compassion and wisdom. All these together, in a dynamic, ongoing, ever-changing development road map, define mindful leadership.

Leading from the Eye of the Hurricane

The fast-paced PAID reality, as exciting and rewarding as it can be, has some downsides. As leaders, unconsciously, we can choose mindless busyness before mindful business. And mindless busyness has potentially destructive implications for ourselves, the people we lead, our organizations, and the world at large.

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Jacqueline Carter is passionate about working with leaders to enhance performance, effectiveness, and well-being. She is a partner with The Potential Project and has worked with leaders from companies around the globe, including from Sony, American Express, RBC, and KPMG. She is a coauthor of the book “One Second Ahead: Enhancing Performance at Work with Mindfulness” and gives regular talks on how to improve focus, clarity, and results in daily work. She has managed teams of more than a hundred people and budgets of more than $60 million. Jacqueline has a master’s degree in organizational behavior and degrees in labor management relations and mathematics.

Gillian Coutts has more than twenty years of experience as a leader and change agent in the sales and operations functions of large corporations. She has worked across a range of industries including retail, government, transport, oil and gas, and human services. Gillian is a partner with The Potential Project Australia. Her clients include Yahoo!, Telstra, BUPA, and large not-for-profit organizations. Gillian is also a coauthor of the book “One Second Ahead: Enhancing Performance at Work with Mindfulness.” She also sits on a number of boards and regularly speaks on integrating mindfulness into leadership, work life, and—following her own wake-up call of cancer diagnosis and treatment—programs for post-traumatic growth.