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Becoming a Mindful Leader: Sit and Be Still

Face reality as it is, not as it was or as you wish it to be. —Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric

Most business books focus on how leaders can achieve more. How can you do more, better...and faster?

This article takes the opposite tack: how and why, as leaders, you should sit and be still. How do your leadership skills benefit when you take time to quiet your mind and simply sit and be still?

Psychologist Daniel Goleman, an authority on emotional intelligence in organizations, calls this the leadership paradox in *Primal Leadership*:

“For leaders, the first task in management has nothing to do with leading others; step one poses the challenge of knowing and managing oneself.”

This includes:

- ▶ Connecting with deep values that guide
- ▶ Instilling actions with meaning
- ▶ Aligning emotions with goals
- ▶ Keeping ourselves motivated
- ▶ Keeping ourselves focused and on task

When we act in accord with these inner measures, we feel good about what we do. Our emotions become contagious. When we, as leaders, feel positive, energized and enthusiastic about our work, so do those we influence.

Honing the skills of awareness leads to mindfulness—becoming aware of what's going on inside and around us on several levels. Mindfulness is living in a state of full, conscious awareness of one's whole self, other people and the context in which we live and work.

Before you dismiss mindfulness as New Age rhetoric, pay attention to the research. Recent studies in management science, psychology and neuroscience point to the importance of developing mindfulness and experiencing meditation.



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Leadership through Mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation has long been practiced by Buddhists and others seeking greater calm and peace of mind. A Buddhist-trained HR executive, Michael Carroll encourages business leaders to take time to sit and be still. Stressed-out executives, he maintains, need a way to reconnect with themselves to become more open and, consequently, more effective.

In his new book, *The Mindful Leader: Awakening Your Natural Management Skills Through Mindfulness Meditation* (2008), Carroll explores the key principles of mindfulness and how they apply to leading organizations.

Mindfulness meditation addresses a wide range of topics, including:

- How to heal toxic workplace cultures where anxiety and stress impede creativity and performance
- How to cultivate courage and confidence in spite of workplace difficulties and economic recession
- How to pursue organizational goals without neglecting what's happening here and now
- How to lead with wisdom and gentleness, not only with ambition, relentless drive and power
- How a personal meditation practice develops your innate leadership talents

In times of recession, experts make a strong case against panic and pessimism. There's no better way to combat fear than to engage in the ancient practice of meditation, which enjoys a long-standing record of success. Even if you tend to shun New Age principles, this may be the time to keep an open mind and learn the tenets of mindfulness meditation.

For many, the idea of pausing during a frantic workday to stop and sit still may seem absurd. As you stare down project deadlines and unpredictable time demands, this suggestion may prompt you to utter "Unacceptable!" or even "Insulting!"

But many U.S. and global workplaces are adopting mindfulness meditation. People are taking time to simply sit still and practice it:

- ▶ Companies like Raytheon, Procter & Gamble, Unilever, Nortel Networks, Comcast and prominent law firms have offered employees classes in mindfulness meditation.
- ▶ Executives like Bill Ford Jr., chairman of Ford Motor Company; Michael Stephen, former chairman of Aetna International; Robert Shapiro, ex-CEO of Monsanto; and Michael Rennie, managing partner of McKinsey & Co., meditate and consider the practice beneficial to running a corporation.

So, while some may view stopping and sitting still for 15–30 minutes an absurd prospect, it may be just the solution to prevent burnout and stress, especially in tough economic times.

Recent research highlights the many benefits of mindfulness meditation:

- ▶ 1. Repaired immune systems
- ▶ 2. Heightened emotional intelligence
- ▶ 3. Reduced anxiety and depression
- ▶ 4. Sustained levels of joy and satisfaction
- ▶ 5. Greater career resilience
- ▶ 6. Improved cardiovascular health
- ▶ 7. Fewer days lost to illness and stress

Scientific studies indicate that practicing mindfulness is just plain healthy. Apart from the published research, leaders who do it experience a wealth of benefits.

The millions who pursue mindfulness meditation are rediscovering what it means to be human. But practicing meditation requires much...well, practice. It demands vulnerability and heart, rather than ambition and achievement—a tall order for hard-driving, results-oriented executives.

Becoming a mindful leader requires you to explore the intimacy of sitting still and learning how such a simple act can transform your complicated, demanding workplace. Let's start with the basics.

What Is Meditation?

In short, mindfulness meditation is a friendly gesture toward ourselves, in which we take time to sit still for 10–15 minutes or longer.

You can meditate in your office, sitting in your chair. Here are some essential guidelines:

- ▶ Sit upright — relaxed, yet alert.
- ▶ Open your eyes and maintain a soft, relaxed, downward gaze.
- ▶ Place hands palms down, resting gently.
- ▶ Tuck in your chin.
- ▶ Breathe normally.
- ▶ Observe your thoughts gently, without judgment.
- ▶ Label your thoughts as "thinking" and dismiss them. Let them go.
- ▶ Return your focus to your being, breathing and bodily sensations.
- ▶ Be still.
- ▶ Experience being you in the moment—in the now.

The Restlessness Experience

Imagine you're at the center of a three-ring circus:

- ▶ 1. Your emotions and thoughts are in one ring.
- ▶ 2. Your body and its physical sensations are in another ring.
- ▶ 3. Your world, your people and all outside sensations are in another ring.

Notice how elements from each ring demand your attention, sending signals to interrupt your quiet meditation. Observe without judgment, and return to sitting quietly, breathing.

At this point, we experience our mind's restlessness. Some call this "monkey chatter." If you're like many, you'll experience a strong desire to be somewhere else, doing other things. You'll be reminded of matters that need your attention. You may think about your desires to become more than you are right now: skinnier, smarter and/or wealthier.

When you experience restlessness, you'll come to realize how you shut down your sense of "here and now"—your own presence in the world as it really exists. We talk to ourselves and become impatient when trying to sit still for even a few moments. It's easy to become distracted, yet hard to sit and be still with ourselves.

This is when we begin to discover how we interact in the world: by shutting off the here and now, distorting our sense of purpose and missing opportunities to appreciate true environment. The ensuing anxiety prevents us from being open.

If you think sitting still for a few minutes is boring and that you should really use this time to do other things, you're missing the opportunity to tap into your talents and skills for leading others.

The greatest obstacle to managing others is lack of self-awareness and the inability to manage ourselves. If you fail to connect with yourself and are constantly "doing," you're not in touch or self-aware. You can't be mindful of others without first being mindful of yourself.

Self-Awareness and Emotional Intelligence

Open, honest and accurate self-awareness is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence for leaders. As Goleman writes in *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*:

"Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs and drives. People with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather they are honest—with themselves and others. People who have a high degree of self-awareness recognize how their feelings affect them, other people and job performance...It shows itself as

candor and an ability to assess oneself realistically. People with high self-awareness are able to speak accurately and openly...about their emotions and the impact they have on their work."

Mindfulness Meditation Benefits

There are two basic approaches to cultivating leadership talents through mindfulness meditation. One is to engage the practice as a method that allows us to improve ourselves. From this perspective, we can develop abilities and benefits. For example, research shows that meditation produces the following positive results:

- ▶ Enhanced physical health
- ▶ Enhanced emotional health
- ▶ Reduced anxiety and stress
- ▶ Feelings of joy and compassion
- ▶ Enhanced wisdom

But if you view meditation solely as a means to achieve positive outcomes, you may misinterpret what you're really doing and misunderstand the reasons why it's important.

The other perspective is to approach meditation from the standpoint of appreciating the experience for itself. Meditation is no longer a means of achieving anything at all. Rather, it becomes an expression of who we are as we meditate.

Being You

To become a mindful leader, you must understand the distinction between trying to improve yourself versus experiencing who you already are:

- As a mindful leader, you acknowledge you're already open (not trying to be more open).
- You acknowledge the wisdom and kindness you hold within (not trying to be more wise or compassionate).
- You don't strive to achieve a better, improved you. Rather, you meditate to get in touch with who you already are and to discover your basic sanity and true qualities, as they already exist within you. You turn off the inner judge and critic.

Your goal has little to do with achieving arrogance and perfectionism (unattainable, for the uninitiated). Instead, you're trying to find comfort with yourself as you are, rather than anxiously trying to become more or better. You're developing a profound sense of honesty—the strongest foundation for genuine leadership, which creates authenticity in your efforts to lead others.

The Art of Non-achievement

Practice mindfulness meditation with non-achievement in mind. Meditation's benefits are attained by exercising unseen "leadership muscles" as you sit still. You can then exert these muscles at work and in all aspects of your life to make a lasting contribution to your world.

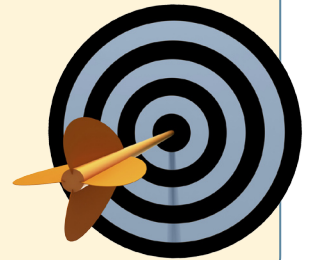
Ten leadership talents developed through meditation are presented in Carroll's book:

Simplicity	Enthusiasm
Poise	Patience
Respect	Awareness
Courage	Skillfulness
Confidence	Humility

These skills develop with practice and can then be applied with a natural ease and familiarity.

Leading others is no small task, requiring a poised, courageous, down-to-earth acknowledgment of reality. Unfortunately, many leaders hang onto delusions of control and prefer the status quo, unwilling to face the risk of being uncomfortable or fearful.

When you slow down, you gain a realistic picture of what's going on instead of speeding through your day—or worse, speeding through your life. Meditation and mindfulness are invitations to become more fully human. In everyday leadership, they confer the power to have a real impact on your organization.



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