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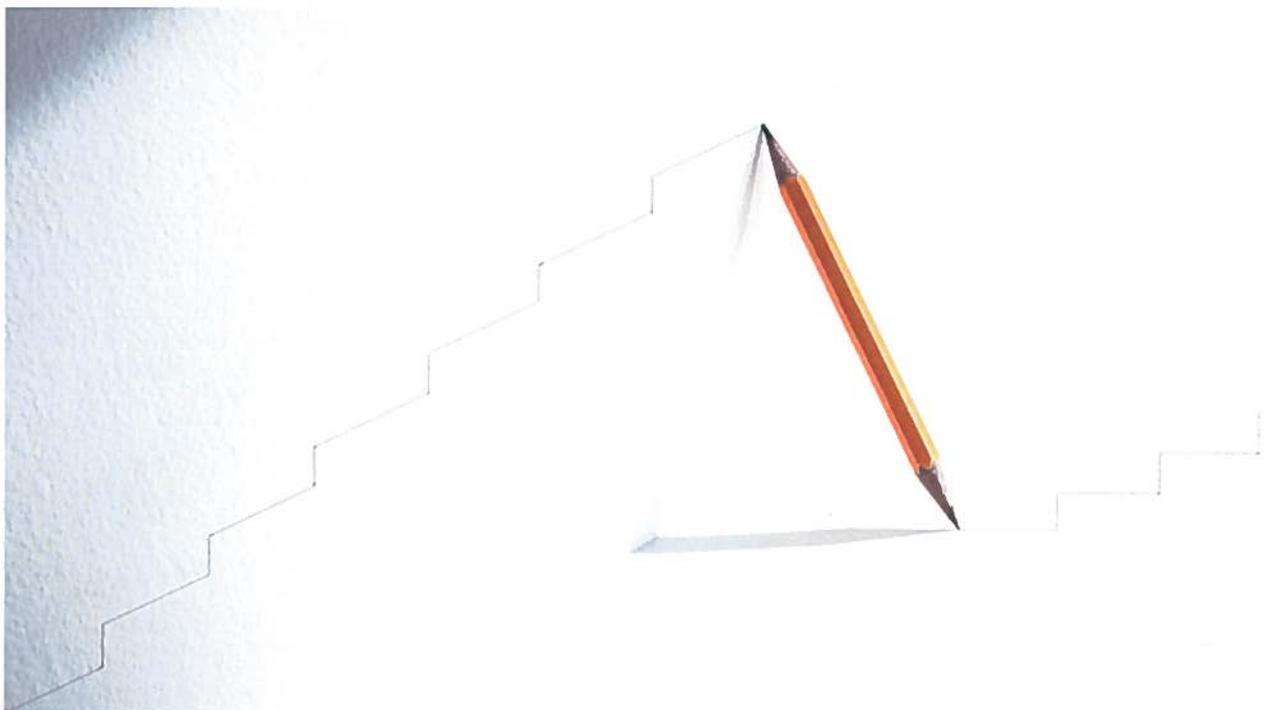
**Harvard  
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LEADERSHIP

# How to Bring Mindfulness to Your Company's Leadership

by Megan Reitz and Michael Chaskalson

DECEMBER 01, 2016



Mindfulness is the height of fashion in leadership development circles. At a recent conference in the field, we saw a missionary-type fervor among some trainers who claimed that mindfulness could fix every ill in the organizational world. It's easy to succumb to enthusiastic hyperbole; one HR director we spoke to was

characteristically delighted to be introducing a two-hour workshop to her board of directors to help them become more resilient, more focused, and more open to challenge.

But hopes like these are justified more by wishing than by any reliable evidence. There is in fact very little data in relation to the impact of mindfulness training on leadership development. Despite plenty of anecdotal support from leaders who have tried mindfulness, the current enthusiasm for it derives mainly from research conducted in clinical contexts that don't much resemble modern organizations.

From the perspective of leadership development, there are three urgent questions that need to be answered if the enthusiasm (and the usefulness of mindfulness in a leadership context) isn't to dissipate.

We need to know:

- Does mindfulness training actually “develop” leadership?
- If it does, *how does it do so?* What are the mechanisms that make it effective?
- And how do we design interventions that actually work?

As we explained in our previous article, to begin to answer these questions we designed a Mindful Leader program involving fortnightly workshops, three of which were face to face and one of which was a shorter virtual meeting. In all, the research studied 57 senior business leaders in two cohorts. Participants learned why mindfulness might be relevant to their leadership practice, how to practice it, and how to apply their learning to their individual leadership challenges.

Each participant “buddied up” with another leader in the program and they were all assigned daily home practice of mindfulness meditation and other exercises for every day that the course ran. We tracked whether and how they practiced, as well

as the impact the program had on a variety of leadership capacities. We sought to understand exactly how their attendance was helping them with their real work issues – if at all.

So, does mindfulness training develop leaders?

Yes and no.

Yes, because our study suggests that mindfulness training produces an improvement in three capacities that are key for successful leadership in the 21st century: resilience, the capacity for collaboration, and the ability to lead in complex conditions.

No, because development depends on the level of practice that the leader does. Simply attending one or more workshops might help strengthen resilience by sharing some useful tools and techniques, but other improvements require practice. The more practice, the better. In our study, the leaders who practiced for at least 10 minutes every day progressed significantly more than others who did not.

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Digging deeper into the mechanisms underlying those changes allowed us to develop a theory of mindful leadership. This, we believe, offers an insight into why practice is so important. It also points to what the ingredients of a mindful leadership training program should be.

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by Megan Reitz and Michael Chaskalson

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The leaders in our program identified a hierarchy of effects. At its base, and underlying all the positive impacts reported, were three meta-capacities that the leaders developed through participating in the program. They are

fundamental and worth emphasizing throughout any mindfulness program:

- **Metacognition.** This is the ability to choose at crucial times to simply observe what you are thinking, feeling, and sensing. It is like stepping out of a fast-flowing and sometimes turbulent stream onto the riverbank so you can actually see what's going on. When you learn to do this, you can better see your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and impulses for what they are. Without metacognition, there is no means of escaping our automatic pilot.
- **Allowing.** This refers to the ability to let what is the case, be the case. It's about meeting your experience with a spirit of openness and kindness to yourself and others. It's not about being passive or weak, but just facing up to what is actually going on in each passing moment. Without *allowing*, our criticism of ourselves and others crushes our ability to observe what is really happening.
- **Curiosity.** This means taking a lively interest in what has shown up in our inner and outer worlds. Without curiosity, we have no impetus for bringing our awareness into the present moment and staying with it.

The leaders in our program told us that, taken together, these three meta-capacities opened up a vital space in the previously automated flow of their experience. One leader summed up what this meant: "I now have moments of choice that I didn't have before."

The leaders in our study became less reactive and more responsive, which in turn affected many other skills, such as regulating their emotions, empathizing with others, focusing more readily on issues at hand, adapting to the situations they found themselves in, and taking broader perspectives into account.

This, we believe, is why mindfulness training can impact the important leadership capacities of resilience, collaboration, and leading in complex conditions.

Mindfulness interventions, as long as they are combined with practice, can indeed develop leadership, and we now know why. But there remains the question about what we learned about how to design those interventions. People seeking to introduce mindfulness into leadership development should be realistic, but there are real benefits to be had. We offer the following tips for anyone designing a mindfulness program:

- If you want to affect your workplace, start with yourself: Develop your own personal practice daily. This helps you to get real about what it takes, particularly in relation to the trials and tribulations of practice.
- Just as with any other intervention, for a mindfulness program to enable genuine change, significant parts of the organizational system need to support it. If you encourage mindful leadership behavior in training but, for example, promote those who display behaviors counter to mindfulness, then your mixed messages might result in stasis.
- A formal “taster session” is often a good starting point: It gauges interest and can build commitment to a program. But it is just that – a start. If you are keen on attaining the impacts reported in our research project, offer an extended mindfulness intervention, which supports practice over a sustained period.
- Allocate a space for people to practice in the workplace – somewhere quiet and private. The well-meaning allocation of a “goldfish bowl” area, the kind of open space or glassed-in meeting room so many offices offer these days, isn't really conducive.
- Encourage people to practice together if they wish to. You can even facilitate group-based, audio-instruction-guided meditation at a particular time of the day.
- Start your meetings with a “mindful minute” (60 seconds where people bring their attention to their breath by counting them in silence) or a similar process that helps attendees choose the quality of their attention and focus on the others present and the issue at hand.

Mindfulness training is not a silver bullet. But when combined with at least 10 minutes of formal daily practice that is supported over a sustained period, it can lead to really valuable change.

Then you can say that mindfulness works.

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**Megan Reitz** is Associate Professor of Leadership and Dialogue at Ashridge Executive Education at Hult International Business School. She is the author of *Dialogue in Organizations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Previously, she was a consultant with Deloitte; surfed the dot-com boom with boo.com; and worked in strategy consulting for The Kalchas Group, now the strategic arm of Computer Science Corporation.

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**Michael Chaskalson** is one of the pioneers of the application of mindfulness in leadership and in the workplace. He is the author of *The Mindful Workplace* (Wiley, 2011) and *Mindfulness in Eight Weeks* (Harper Thorsons, 2014). Michael has also been a successful social entrepreneur, founding a fair trade company that came to have annual sales of £10 million and 200 employees. He is a Professor of Practice at Ashridge Executive Education at Hult International Business School.

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**Rynele Mardis** 5 months ago

More often than not approaches such as mindfulness are dismissed because the value is not fully understood. This trend will hopefully change as more empirical data reaches the masses.

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