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Mindfulness Skills for Leadership Development

ABSTRACT

Mindfulness is a learned skill based in individual practice. In an attempt to enhance individual levels of mindfulness within our leadership courses and demonstrate how mindfulness practices might be adopted within organizations, we incorporated a series of mindfulness exercises into our curriculum. While developed for undergraduate and graduate courses in leadership, the exercises would also be appropriate for courses in organizational behavior and human resource management at the graduate and undergraduate level.

Key Words: mindfulness, leadership, experiential exercises

Mindfulness Skills for Leadership Development

Mindfulness, described as attention to the present moment, involves external awareness and attention to one's mind (Sutcliffe, 2016) without reactivity or judgment (Glomb, Dufy Bono, & Yang, 2011). Hougaard and Carter (2016) define mindfulness as having two components, focus and awareness. Focus is defined as "the ability to concentrate on what you're doing in the moment" and awareness is defined as the "ability to avoid or reduce distractions" (Hougaard and Carter, 2016, np). In sum, the practice of mindfulness entails non-judgmental aware of one's assumptions and perceptions and the emotions and attitudes attached to them (Tuleja, 2014). In contrast, mindlessness, characterized by a lack of awareness of the present moment, encompasses rumination on past errors (Watkins, 2008), attentional distractibility (Creswell, 2017), automatic pilot functioning (Creswell, 2017; Kang, Gruber, & Gray, 2013), and reactive future planning (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

Increasingly, organizations and business schools recognize the importance of mindfulness to management success (Kim & Shy, 2015) and to fostering healthy organizational cultures (Schuyler, Taylor, & Wolberger, 2018). Management educators propose that incorporating mindfulness into the management curriculum enables students to view situations from multiple perspectives and decreases resistance to change (Kuechler & Stedham, 2018). The topic of mindfulness can be incorporated into undergraduate and graduate management classroom discussions regarding authentic leadership, workplace spirituality, organizational culture, employee wellness, stress management, ethics, international business, employee work attitudes, and meaningful work to name a few. It aligns with courses in Human Resource Management, Human Resource Development, Leadership, and Organizational Behavior. This submission involves three mindfulness exercises incorporated into our classes to help students gain more

self-awareness of their own level of mindfulness, provide them with an experiential understanding of mindfulness and its benefits, and demonstrate how mindfulness practices might be adopted within organizations. These exercises should be conducted face-to-face.

Mindfulness has gained interest among practitioners and researchers (McGhee & Grant 2015). A growing body of scientific research suggests that mindfulness and the practices associated with it significantly benefit workplace outcomes, including performance, relationships, and well-being. (For a recent review see Good et al., 2016.) Research on the impact of mindfulness on workplace outcomes suggests that mindfulness can positively influence both individual and organizational outcomes. Glomb and colleagues (2011) found that mindfulness improved social relationships, increases resiliency, and improved task performance. Other researchers found positive relationships between mindfulness and job performance (Dane & Brummel, 2014; Good, et al. 2016), communication quality (Burgon et al. 2000), and emotion regulation, emotional exhaustion, and job satisfaction (Hülshager et al., 2013). Other authors suggest that mindfulness may enhance both the personal and business success of leaders. Relative to the impact of mindfulness on leadership, studies found increased resilience, the capacity for collaboration, and the ability to lead in complex conditions (Reitz and Chaskalson 2016).

As educators, we have introduced mindfulness as a topic and practice in our undergraduate and graduate leadership courses. In the undergraduate leadership course, the instructor presents mindfulness as a workplace spirituality practice associated with positive organizational and individual-level outcomes such as heightened self-awareness, improved relationships, increased self-regulation, and stress reduction. In the graduate course in leadership, the other educator facilitates mindfulness as a foundational element to crafting a personal

leadership practice. In crafting a personal leadership practice, students are invited to carve out space and time for mindful practice, both proactively and in the moment. In this way, they are encouraged to contemplate the possibility that personal leadership (which is linked closely to Senge's (2006) notion of personal mastery) does not happen anecdotally or incidentally over time. Rather, it is a disciplined process that can benefit from developing mindfulness.

Furthermore, it can support us in becoming more present and more able to learn from the collective wisdom of the group. Baldwin and Linnea (2010) offered,

There is an inner core of preparation that serves us in this work. The more we are each able to listen for a sense of guidance, rather than pulling our responses to situations out of our habitual thinking, the more readily we prepare to receive the wisdom that lies waiting in any gathering of people. (p. 40)

Therefore, when given the necessary space, time, and opportunity for reflexivity and collaboration, possibilities for enhancing leadership success may emerge. Pausing to understand how our ways of being, doing, and seeing the world through, what Senge (2006) identified as our mental models, can deepen our understandings about how individual elements are connected to the whole; how we might influence the people and processes in creative and innovative ways. As such, there can be a direct connection between personal mastery and systems thinking (Senge, 2006) and systems being (Laszlo, 2012). Recognizing this connection can serve to intentionally foster healthy organizational cultures (Schuyler, Taylor, & Wolberger, 2018). As learners and leaders consider deeply their connection to self and interconnection with the world and draw upon mindful practices, they can more intentionally choose how they will show up and lead change.

Learning Objectives

The overall learning objective for this session is to introduce the concepts and practices of mindfulness as linked to leadership. By participating in the session, individuals will be able to: (1) gain more self-awareness of their own level of mindfulness, (2) acquire an experiential understanding of three mindfulness practices; and, (3) consider different practices that can be brought into the classroom to enhance leadership development.

Exercise Overview

To begin, we will have participants complete and score a mindfulness self-assessment to determine where they are currently with regards to mindfulness in everyday living. (See Appendix A). Three mindfulness exercises will be facilitated to illustrate what mindfulness is and how to anchor a mindfulness practice and expand mindfulness from self to others, (See Appendix B). A brief overview of the three mindfulness exercises are as follows:

Exercise 1: A Mindfulness Eating Meditation

Mindfulness involves experiential processing (Brown et al., 2007; Teasdale, 1999), which involves attention to the internal or external stimulus by registering facts observed. In order to illustrate how mindful awareness can be brought to every aspect of daily life and de-mystify the process of mindfulness meditation, participants will be introduced to the raisin meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Participants will be offered raisins and guided by the facilitator through a state of alert attentiveness to completely and mindfully consume one raisin.

Exercise 2: Breath as an anchor for Mindfulness

Following one's breath is an anchoring practice for grounding and centering. It enables people to come back to the present moment. Participants will be introduced to the notion of breath as an anchor to return to become present in one's own body and environment at any given

moment. Participants will be guided through a sitting meditation that focuses on their breath; experiencing each inhalation with vitality, wakefulness, and awareness. This exercise will serve to strengthen moment-to-moment awareness, calmness, and interconnection with how they are currently feeling and doing. In the debrief, other variations for anchoring will be discussed such as body scans and walking meditations.

Exercise 3: Lovingkindness Meditation

This exercise will serve to help participants move from a perspective of self (me) to others (we). In the debrief, will explore the role of compassion for mindful change and other variations will be discussed such as Metta Forgiveness Meditation (which serves to release emotions such as anger, hurt, and resentment, to enhance relationships with coworkers) and Visualizing (which activates the power of imagination to access inner wisdom for clarity and purposeful action).

Our exercises are based on strong adult education principles such as experiential (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb 2017), transformative (Dirkx, 2006; Mezirow, 2000; O’Sullivan & Morrell, 2002); reflective (Schön, 1984), and whole-person learning (Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

Session Description

After a brief introduction and overview of mindfulness (~5 minutes), participants will complete and score a mindfulness self-assessment [(Appendix A) ~ 10 minutes]. Next, participants will be invited to participate in three mindfulness exercises (Appendix B ~15 minutes each). Each exercise will be debriefed via a large group discussion (~30 minutes). The debrief will follow two overarching questions, namely, what was inside this activity for the participants and how does this activity link to developing leadership. The remaining time will be

used for reflection and discussion on how mindfulness might be incorporated into the management classroom. We are requesting 90 minutes for this session.

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APPENDIX A Mindfulness Awareness Scale¹

Mindful Attention Awareness Scale Description: The MAAS is a 15-item scale designed to assess a core characteristic of dispositional mindfulness. The scale shows strong psychometric properties and has been validated with college, community, and cancer patient samples. Correlational, quasi-experimental, and laboratory studies have shown that the MAAS taps a unique quality of consciousness that is related to, and predictive of, a variety of self-regulation and well-being constructs.

Instructions: Below is a collection of statements about your everyday experience. Using the 1-6 scale below, please indicate how frequently or infrequently you currently have each experience. Please answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be. Please treat each item separately from every other item.

1	2	3	4	5	6					
Almost Always	Very Frequently	Somewhat Frequently	Somewhat Infrequently	Very Infrequently	Almost Never					
I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until sometime later.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I break or spill things because of carelessness, not paying attention, or thinking of something else.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I tend to walk quickly to get where I'm going without paying attention to what I experience along the way.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I forget a person's name almost as soon as I've been told it for the first time.					1	2	3	4	5	6
It seems I am "running on automatic," without much awareness of what I'm doing.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I'm doing right now to get there.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I drive places on "automatic pilot" and then wonder why I went there.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.					1	2	3	4	5	6
6 I find myself doing things without paying attention.					1	2	3	4	5	6
I snack without being aware that I'm eating.					1	2	3	4	5	6

To score the scale, simply compute a mean of the 15 items. Higher scores reflect higher levels of dispositional mindfulness.

¹Brown, K.W. & Ryan, R.M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 822-848.

APPENDIX B Exercise Scripts

I. Mindfulness Eating Script

1. Find a comfortable seated position. Come into the present moment by taking a few breaths, noticing how you feel physically.
2. Place a few raisins in your hand. Notice the impulse you might have to pop them all in your mouth right away.
3. Look at the raisins, examining them with curiosity as if you've never seen one before.
4. Notice how they feel in your hand – the texture, shape and weight. You may want to close your eyes while doing this.
5. Notice the color of the raisins and if they have any unique features.
6. Imagine where the raisins came from, how they started as juicy grapes on the vine. Picture the workers on the farm harvesting the grapes and another set of workers transporting the raisins to the store.
7. Slowly bring one raisin to your nose to see what it smells like. Notice how naturally your arm moves to do this.
8. Continue to notice any thoughts of like or dislike you might have of as you observe the raisin. Notice whether you're anticipating what it will taste like. Perhaps you're starting to salivate or feeling an impulse to put the raisin into your mouth right away.
9. Ever so slowly, place the raisin in your mouth, without biting into it. Explore what it feels like in your mouth, notice what your tongue is doing. Keep it in your mouth without chewing for at least 10 seconds. Notice what it's like to take this time before eating the raisin.

10. When you are ready, slowly and softly bite into the piece of food. Now take one bite and notice the flavor and texture. Slowly begin to chew the piece of food and notice the parts of your mouth involved in chewing. Notice the sounds and movements of chewing as you continue to notice the flavor and texture.
11. When you are ready, slowly and softly bite into the raisin, taking one or two bites.
12. Without swallowing, notice what it tastes like, how its flavor and texture changes as you chew. Notice your natural impulse to swallow it.
13. When you are ready, swallow the raisin.
14. Sit quietly and notice what you are feeling.

II. Breathe as an anchor for Mindfulness Script

1. Once again, find a comfortable seated position.
2. Take a few moments to be mindful of this time in which you just be. Just relax into who you are here and now at this moment. Breathe in. Breathe out.
3. If you haven't already, close your eyes, or soften your gaze so that you are looking downward. Let your shoulders relax and your arms and hands rest easily.
4. Take a moment and just notice your breath. Do not seek to change it. Just observe it. What is it doing? Is it rapid? Slow? Forced? Relaxed?
5. Now begin by taking 3-5 deep breaths mindfully in through your nose and out through your mouth. Breath in and out maximizing the air coming in and going out of your body. As you breath in, let your belly expand, as you breath out, let your belly contract.
6. Feel your breathe come in through your nose, down through your throat, chest, and belly, and then back up through your belly, chest, throat, and out your nose. Seek to make the

inhale longer than the exhale. So if you are inhaling for the count of 5 or 6, then exhale for a count of 7 or 8.

7. With each breath become aware of any tensions or sore spots in your body. Let your breath wash anything that is not serving you.
8. As you breathe out, release, soften, and surrender. With each breath in, breathe in vitality, wakefulness, and awareness. Settle into your body, this place, this space. Become fully present in who you are, here and now, at this moment.
9. *Silence allowed for a few minutes while participants are breathing mindfully.*
10. When you are ready, come back to being present in the circle with us all.

III. Lovingkindness Meditation Script

1. This meditation is adapted from Jack Kornfield (2008)'s book, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*. We will begin with self, move to others, and then the planet as a whole. We begin with self because loving and leading self is foundational to loving and leading others.
2. I invite you to close your eyes once again. Begin by breathing in and out gently. Follow your breath.
3. In a moment you will begin to repeat inwardly, the following traditional phrases that are directed to your own well-being:

May I be filled with lovingkindness.

May I be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May I be well in body and mind.

May I be at ease and happy.
4. Let's begin.

Picture yourself as you are now, and hold that image in a heart of lovingkindness. Or perhaps you will find it easier to picture yourself as a young and beloved child. Whatever you choose, hold the image of yourself, opening your heart to embracing yourself with lovingkindness, and repeat inwardly after me:

May I be filled with lovingkindness.

May I be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May I be well in body and mind.

May I be at ease and happy.

(Note: Repeat Phrases 2x again - 3x in total)

5. Now that you have experienced a stronger sense of lovingkindness for yourself, we will now expand your awareness to include others.

In the essence of time, we are only going to pick one person, you could choose someone in your life who has loved or truly cared for you, a person who is neutral to you... This could be an acquaintance, a colleague at work, someone you have seen on the street. Or, you may choose someone who you find more challenging in your life. Someone who evokes feelings of anger, or irritation, or frustration in you.

You choose - which person - who evokes what degree of emotional charge for you. As you recite the phrases, your feelings are subject to change. Simply continue to plant the seeds of loving wishes, repeating the phrases gently no matter what arises.

6. Let's begin.

Picture the person of your choice and gently recite the same phrases inwardly while visualizing this person:

May you be filled with lovingkindness.

May you be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May you be well in body and mind.

May you be at ease and happy.

(Note: Repeat Phrases 2x again - 3x in total)

7. Now we are going to move beyond individual someones. We could focus on our community, our country, and/or our planet. Today, we are going to jump right to our planet. Imagine you are floating in space, observing the Earth as a whole, and as you observe, gently recite ~

May the Earth be filled with lovingkindness.

May the Earth be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May the Earth be well in body and being.

May the Earth be at ease and happy.

(Note: Repeat Phrases 2x again - 3x in total)

8. Now I invite you to refocus on your breath and/or anchor. Notice how you are feeling now. Continue breathing in and out gently.
9. When you are ready, come back to being present in the circle with us all.