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Mindful Leadership: Compassion, contemplation and meditation develop effective leaders

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The highly visible corporate leadership failures of recent years have deeply shaken public confidence in business leaders. All too often these leaders have placed self-interest ahead of the well-being of their organizations. After the companies got in trouble, their leaders then refused to take responsibility for the harm caused to the people they served. The problems at British Petroleum, Hewlett-Packard, and failed Wall Street firms, along with the actions of dozens of leaders who failed in the post-Enron era, are glaring examples of these lapses in leadership.

As a result, there has been a widespread loss of trust in business and political leaders in the past decade. Reactions to these issues range from anger and despair to more generalized suspicion of institutions and their leaders. The Harvard Center for Public Leadership *2009 National Leadership Index* revealed that 69 percent of those surveyed believe there is a leadership crisis in the U.S., with politicians, media, finance, and business leaders getting the lowest ratings. European studies report similar results.

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Once lost, trust is very hard to regain. The root cause of the problem rests not with having strong leaders, but in choosing the wrong leaders for the wrong reasons. In the past two decades far too many leaders have been selected more for charisma than character, for style

over substance, and for image rather than integrity. If charisma, style and image are the selection criteria, why are we surprised when leaders turn out to lack character, substance and integrity?

Leadership's lost decade

The past ten years have seen so many leadership letdowns that this period can appropriately be characterized as "Leadership's Lost Decade."¹ Failed leadership led to the dot.com collapse of 2002, resulted in hundreds of leaders acknowledging accounting misstatements following the bankruptcies of Enron and WorldCom, and caused the meltdown of global financial markets in 2008 that triggered the Great Recession and the ongoing jobs crisis.

These failures—which destroyed so many strong organizations—occurred because leaders focused on short-term results and rewards while placing their personal needs ahead of the organizations and institutions they were charged with leading. Since retiring from Medtronic in 2002, I have been studying where these leaders of my generation went astray and what will be required to develop better leaders in the future.

In examining these failures, I cannot identify a single leader who failed due to lack of intelligence (IQ). On the contrary, the unsuccessful leaders I have observed in person or through their words and deeds appear to have failed due to low levels of emotional intelligence (EQ).

Many failed leaders seem to lack an awareness of themselves and their actions. Often they do not have a deep understanding of their motivations, and they have not fully accepted their crucibles – fears and failures emanating from earlier experiences, many of which date back to childhood. These characteristics often cause leaders to lose sight of their values, especially when they are under pressure to sustain their success. In other cases, leaders who lack self-awareness get seduced by success and its rewards – money, power, and recognition.

A new generation of authentic leaders

"Authentic leaders are genuine in their intentions and understand the purpose of their leadership is serving their customers, employees and investors, not their self-interest."

Authentic leaders are genuine in their intentions and understand the purpose of their leadership is serving their customers, employees and investors, not their self-interest. They must practice their values consistently, balance their extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, build trustworthy relationships, and operate with high levels of personal discipline.

The emergence of a new generation of authentic leaders must happen at all levels of organizations to rebuild confidence in corporations. In the 21st century, leaders need to empower other people to lead, rather than controlling them through hierarchies. Leaders need to inspire those around them, giving them the confidence they need to step up to leadership challenges throughout the organization.

Being authentic also requires high levels of emotional intelligence, as described by Daniel Goleman in his book by that name.² The central element of EQ is self-awareness – a deep

sense of oneself and one's impact on others. In my experience most leaders struggle for many years to develop this level of self-awareness, myself included. All too often they are distracted by their desire to achieve success in the eyes of others and the recognition that comes with it.

Developing mindfulness

To gain a deeper understanding of how people become self-aware, I have been examining the concept of mindfulness, which Buddhists have developed through the practice of meditation. Mindfulness – the awareness of one's mental processes and the understanding of how one's mind works – offers leaders a path to address challenges and adversity in a non-judgmental, non-threatening way. It is a logical step in the process of gaining self-awareness that needs to be integrated with actual experience in leading in challenging situations and gaining awareness through feedback and group support.

“Mindfulness enables leaders to be fully present, aware of themselves and their impact on other people, and sensitive to their reactions to stressful situations.”

Mindfulness enables leaders to be fully present, aware of themselves and their impact on other people, and sensitive to their reactions to stressful situations. Leaders who are mindful tend to be more effective in understanding and relating to others, and motivating them toward shared goals.

I have meditated regularly for more than thirty years, not as a religious or spiritual practice, but as a personal discipline to relieve stress. Meditation has been the single most important thing I have done to improve my leadership. It has helped me become more self-aware and more compassionate toward myself and others. It has also enabled me to remain calm and clear-thinking in the face of pressure and uncertainty.

Meditation enables people to be more aware of their circumstances, less reactive to stress, more compassionate, and better equipped to approach challenging issues in a calm, thoughtful manner. In addition to meditation, many people increase their mindfulness through prayer, introspective discussions, yoga, therapy, and reflective exercises.

New neurological research on the impact of meditation on the brain demonstrates that it can reshape the part of the brain that impacts emotional intelligence, much more so than can be done for the hard-wired elements of the brain that determine IQ. *Driven to Lead*,³ a new book by Harvard Professor-emeritus Paul Lawrence, discusses how the mind can be remodeled for leadership.

Lawrence starts with Charles Darwin's original theory that “It is not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the most adaptive to change.”⁴ He extends this theory in what he terms “renewed Darwin” to the development of the mind's leadership qualities. Developing clarity through mindfulness enables leaders to integrate their four drives – security, material acquisition, bonding with others, and the search for meaning – into an integrated decision-making process.

Mindful leadership: A new way to sustain effective leadership

To gain a deeper understanding of how meditation works, I have had the privilege of several interactions with the Dalai Lama and have developed a relationship with Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, a leading Tibetan Buddhist meditation master. Both of them want to offer meditation to those in the West, not as a religious belief, but as a secular practice that can positively impact our lives and contribute to a more peaceful world.

While participating with the Dalai Lama at the Mind & Life XX Conference on "Compassion and Altruism in Economic Systems" in Zurich this past April, Mingyur Rinpoche and I explored how we could combine the Buddhist notion of mindfulness meditation and authentic leadership to develop "mindful leaders."

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Mindful leadership is a *secular* idea that enables people to sustain effective leadership throughout their lifetimes. It enables them to be fully present, aware of themselves and their impact on other people, and focused on achieving the goals of their organizations. Mindful leadership aims to develop self-aware and compassionate leaders by combining Western understanding of authentic leadership with Eastern wisdom about the mind, developed from practices that have been used for thousands of years.

To engage in a deeper exploration of these ideas Mingyur Rinpoche and I jointly led the Mindful Leadership conference on August 13-14, 2010 in Minneapolis. The event brought together 400 participants to examine how mindfulness can contribute to sustaining effective leadership and to explore the relationship of self-awareness and self-compassion to leadership development. To our knowledge, this was the first time a Buddhist Rinpoche and a leadership professor joined forces to explore how Eastern teaching can inform Western thinking about leadership, and vice versa.

Gaining self-awareness and self-compassion

For leaders to become self-aware, they need to understand their life stories and the impact of their crucibles, and reflect on how their life stories and crucibles contribute to their motivations and their behaviors. Leaders who do not take time for introspection and reflection on their life stories, crucibles and experiences are more vulnerable to being seduced by external rewards, such as power, money, and recognition. These leaders also may feel a need to appear so perfect to others that they cannot admit vulnerabilities and acknowledge their mistakes.

In the process of becoming more self-aware, leaders learn to accept their weaknesses, failures, and vulnerabilities, just as they appreciate their strengths and successes. In so doing, they gain compassion for themselves and the ability to relate to the world around them in authentic ways. This frees them from the need to adopt pretenses to impress other people. In understanding themselves and who they are at a deeper level, people learn how to reframe their failures and negative experiences into positive growth opportunities.

Leaders with low EQ often lack compassion for themselves. Without self-compassion, it is difficult to feel compassion and empathy for others. Many people appear to be highly compassionate toward people they care about or who are close to them, but then express disdain, rejection and hostility for people whose beliefs and characteristics are different than their own. These leaders have a tendency to use or manipulate other people, particularly those with less perceived power. As a result, they are unable to establish authentic relationships that can be sustained over time.

Leaders that lack self-awareness also often lack the ability to self-regulate. Some leaders exhibit high levels of self-control and self-discipline in normal times. When they are under pressure or feel vulnerable, they revert to their worst traits, such as emotional outbursts or excessive use of power and control. Others move in the opposite direction, feeling immobilized or withdrawing just when their leadership is needed most.

“Authentic leaders never let their organizations lose sight of a shared sense of purpose and common values.”

Leaders who develop self-awareness and self-compassion are better able to cope with high levels of stress and pressure. They maintain the capacity to empower people to perform at a very high level even under very difficult circumstances. Authentic leaders never let their organizations lose sight of a shared sense of purpose and common values. With the unity that results from this alignment and consistency, organizations are able to take on very challenging goals, overcome great difficulties and adverse circumstances, and achieve exceptional results on a sustainable basis.

The final step in gaining self-awareness requires going beyond the introspection and reflection that mindfulness meditation brings. True self-awareness—and mindful leadership—happens by gaining shared awareness through a personal support group. Having both practiced meditation and participated in a support group, I have personally experienced the highly beneficial impact that the combination of these two practices have had on my leadership effectiveness.

I am fortunate to have two such groups in my life. One of these groups consists of eight men who meet weekly to discuss the essential questions of life, as well as the challenges we are facing. The group was especially helpful to me when I was considering leaving Honeywell to join Medtronic back in 1989, and also when my wife Penny was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1996. The second group is a couples group, consisting of four couples, which meets monthly and engages in important questions that we are facing in our lives and our families.

These support groups provide a safe place for sharing our deepest concerns and most personal questions. They offer the vital link between our personal lives and introspective practices and the much larger organizations that all of us work in and live with every day. Their honest feedback provides a sense of shared awareness that deepens and enriches our self-awareness and helps us stay on track.

Concluding thoughts

Mindful leadership is an emerging idea in the early stages of development and validation. It offers the promise of using long-established practices from Eastern traditions like Buddhism in a secular manner to develop higher levels of self-awareness and self-compassion. In turn, the greater level of calm, clarity, and tranquility of mindful leaders will lead to more effective leadership and to developing more authentic organizations.

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Mindful leadership will help the new generation of authentic leaders to restore trust in their leadership and to build sustainable organizations known for their harmony. Its ultimate goal is to create a more harmonious and peaceful world for all to live in.

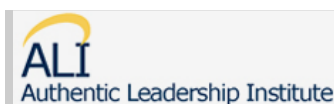
Author’s Note: For a deeper exploration of mindfulness, read Ellen Langer’s pioneering book, Mindfulness. For readers interested in meditation, I recommend Jon Kabat-Zinn’s book Wherever You Go, There You Are and his CD Guided Mindfulness Meditation, and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche’s books The Joy of Living and Joyful Wisdom.

Notes

- 1 “Leadership’s Lost Decade,” by Bill George, appeared in wallstreetjournal.com, February 3, 2010.
- 2 Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. Published by Bantam Dell, New York, NY, 1995.
- 3 Lawrence, P. *Driven to Lead*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- 4 Darwin, C. *The Descent of Man*.

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