Mindful Leadership: Discovering Wisdom Beyond Certainty

by Susan Szpakowski

Everywhere we hear the drumbeat of change. Organizations and communities must become more innovative, resilient, adaptive. As leaders we are increasingly called to reinvent our strategies, companies, even entire social systems, while inspiring others to do the same.

We are also called to reinvent ourselves—to let go of familiar habits, stretch in new ways, rise to meet accelerating challenges. But even the most adventurous and risk-loving among us have our limits. Too much uncertainty and our survival mechanism kicks in and we are at the mercy of fight-or-flight impulses.

Both change and resistance to change are facts of life. Any living system is constantly balancing these two imperatives. As we lead through situations of high complexity and heightened uncertainty, how do we manage the deep-seated resistance, fear, and impulse towards retrenchment that inevitably follow?

Default

It is not as if we can dismiss this resistance lightly. It seems that our brains are programmed to continually create as much certainty as possible. In his book *Your Brain at Work,* David Rock (2009) cites evidence from neuroscience that this impulse exists even at the level of perception:

> You don't just hear; you hear and predict what should come next. You don't just see; you predict what you should be seeing moment to moment.... The brain likes to know what is going on by recognizing patterns in the world. It likes to feel certain. Like an addiction to anything, when the craving for certainty is met, there is a sensation of reward.... When you can't predict the outcome of a situation, an alert goes to the brain to pay more attention. An overall *away* response occurs. (pp. 121-122)

Thus the tendency to move towards certainty, or to fabricate it when it isn't there, is one of the brain's primary impulses.

Anyone who has studied Buddhism will recognize parallels between these conclusions and the traditional Buddhist understanding of how the mind works. In both cases, insights into our default responses can offer much-needed guidance for today's leaders. For these leaders must learn how to linger in a state of not-knowing, facing the anxiety that arises, rather than holding on to comforting certainties that are ultimately blinding and deceptive

Ego's craft

Much of my own understanding of Buddhism comes from my years studying with the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa, who arrived in North America in 1970 as a young but already accomplished meditation master intensely committed to making a genuine link between Western culture and the wisdom tradition he had inherited. He shed his monastic robes and became immersed in the language, idiom, and questing minds of his new Western students. As a teacher he was delightful—inquisitive, magnetic, wise, playful. This was my first and most powerful encounter with a leader operating from a place beyond ego.

According to the Western Buddhist definition, ego is the process of fabricating certainty. A sophisticated, moment-to-moment process freezes, judges, anticipates, and assumes what is going on, driven by an unconscious anxiety that something is missing, something needs to be secured. But reality can't be secured; ego's mission can never be accomplished. Thus, ego's process is the source of misunderstandings from the most trivial to the most profound and is at the root of a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction.

While this process is ongoing, any indication of threat sends it into high gear, producing elaborate self-justifications, fantasies, and fears. Trying to suppress, rationalize, or override ego's process just adds to the struggle. According to Buddhism, the primary antidote is to relax the momentum by establishing a different kind of ground, one that is not ego-based, through the practice of mindfulness.

While many leaders practice formal mindfulness meditation as an ongoing support for their work, not everyone is motivated to adopt such a practice. However, anyone can apply the foundational principles of meditation to their everyday leadership.

Grounding

One of Trungpa's early teachings was on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, a traditional Buddhist instruction on how to meditate. Trungpa (1991) described the first foundation, *mindfulness of body,* as "connected with the need for a sense of being, a sense of groundedness" (p. 28). Bringing one's attention to the physical sensations of the body creates

a simple, dependable reference point that side-steps ego's tendency to create false ground by churning out reactive thoughts and emotions, which deplete focus and energy. In sitting meditation, the posture of straight back, relaxed front, shapes one's mind in a way that is stable, open, and available.

The psychosomatic body is sitting, so your thoughts have a flat bottom. Mindfulness of body is connected with the earth. It is an openness that has a base, a foundation. A quality of expansive awareness develops through mindfulness of body—a sense of being settled and of therefore being able to afford to open out. (Trungpa, 1991, p. 31)

Mindfulness of body can be practiced in any context, at any time of the day. At our desk, we can set a time to take a break, sit straight, and let the mind rest, anchored by a general sense of body awareness. When we find ourselves distracted, we simply return to the experience of body. We can also cue ourselves to come back to mindfulness with a physical gesture or activity we do regularly, such as answering the phone or walking across the office. The activity itself—the sensation of one's hand on the receiver or feet on the floor—becomes a reminder to tune in to the body.

A regular physical activity such as running, sports, dance, yoga, Aikido, or taking a lunchtime walk also helps us stay grounded and increases the likelihood that we will come back to mindfulness of body many times during the day.

All these ways of paying attention to body can help provide a base that increases our chances of being able to "open out" our attention and be expansive and accommodating without being overwhelmed or triggered by anxiety.

Recognizing and releasing

The second foundation, *mindfulness of life,* addresses the survival impulse even more explicitly. Mindfulness of life involves recognizing and releasing the tightness, struggle, and distraction that characterize obsessive thinking. When we find ourselves preoccupied, we let go and come back to the body, the outbreath, the present moment. Trungpa describes this process as "touch and go." Rather than dismissing, suppressing, or judging, we simply "touch" the thought, as well as the energy and impulse behind it, and then we "go," let go, into the next moment. We don't feed the momentum with more attention and energy.

> *Touch that presence of life being lived, then go. You do not have to ignore it. "Go" does not mean that you have to turn your back on the experience and shut yourself off from it; it means just to be in it without further analysis and without further reinforcement.*
>
> (Trungpa, 1991, p. 36)

When touch-and-go is an ongoing practice, we become intimately familiar with the particular ways we try to manage uncertainty, because we have "touched" them with mindfulness many times. This familiarity makes recognition easier.

Other frameworks can serve the same purpose. In *Your Brain at Work,* David Rock (2009) reflects:

> *I noticed a surprising pattern while putting this book together. I saw that there are five domains of social experience that your brain treats the same as survival issues. These domains form a model, which I call the SCARF model, which stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness. The model describes the interpersonal primary rewards or threats that are important to the brain. Getting to know these five elements strengthens your director. It's a way of developing language for experiences that may be otherwise unconscious, so that you can catch these experiences occurring in real time.* (pp. 195-196)

Rock defines the "director" as the aspect of attention that is self-aware, that notices an impulse and can choose to let it go in the moment of recognition. He explicitly links this function to mindfulness. Rock's five domains also resonate with Buddhist descriptions of ego's concerns: to be recognized, to be certain, to be in control, to gain approval, and to be reassured that one is getting a fair deal. When any of these is challenged or denied, ego goes into hyper-drive, reinforcing its defenses out of fear of losing ground.

Shortly after reading Rock's book and contemplating his categories, I had an excellent opportunity to apply the touch-and-go practice of mindfulness of life. I was about to board a plane with my son when I received an email that literally stopped me cold. Someone I had invited into a new project had become offended. He referred to a conversation he'd had with a mutual friend but didn't provide details. He mentioned withdrawing funding support for another unrelated project. I quickly responded, expressing genuine confusion and suggesting we talk. Then I got on the plane.

During the flight the anxiety triggered by the email kept breaking through conversations with my son. The initial shock was now producing wave after wave of speculation. If this person turned against me, the repercussions would be far-reaching. The project, which I knew was ambitious and risky, would backfire. I would fail, be humiliated, shunned. Why did I always go out on a limb like this? Why didn't I know better? Why had I trusted this person in the first place? How could he do this? As each line of thinking rose to a crescendo, I would suddenly recognize

the pattern and apply the label…. Oh, right. Status. Relatedness. Fairness. And I could see the underlying fears begin to freeze into a solidified position: righteousness, self-doubt, closing the door on the other. With each recognition, I would "touch" these thoughts and emotions with mindfulness, recognize them, then "go"—return to the simplicity of sitting in the seat, in the present, on the plane, with my son.

Over the following days, efforts to reassure myself that this message was simply a mistake, soon to be cleared up, became less convincing during the notable silence that ensued. I even woke up one morning dreaming that I was telling my colleagues I had failed them. Touch-and-go was not a quick fix but something that I needed to keep applying while the impulse continued to play itself out.

Obviously the email had hit a nerve, or multiple nerves, connected to my survival imperative. Recognizing this helped prevent me from solidifying a conclusion, an emotional stance, complete with elaborate justifications, which would be difficult to undo and which would probably only exacerbate the problem. I was able to avoid feeding my deep-seated insecurities. By the time I returned from my trip I was able to have the needed conversation from a place that was grounded and sympathetic both to myself and to the perspectives of the other person. I was ready to voice my concerns while keeping the door open. I could hear the other person recognize his own sense of threatened certainty, triggered by unrelated events, which had led to the misunderstanding. The crisis was over, and we were ready to move forward.

Mindfulness of life is a very personal practice. Every time we are able to catch ourselves being triggered, we have a glimpse of our own survival pattern as well as the possibility of responding a different way. We are able to choose. And every time we choose a more generous, considered response, that neural pathway, that mental habit, that relationship with the other, is strengthened and our leadership grows a little larger and a little stronger.

Willing to be here

The third foundation is *mindfulness of effort.* Preconceptions about meditation-in-action often conjure images of someone moving slowly, deliberately, dutifully through their day. In this case, mindfulness is much less somber and self-conscious than that. It is more like an attitude or an atmosphere. In the midst of whatever we are doing we "come back" because we have made an intention to be mindful and because mindfulness is a natural aspect of mind, always available. Trungpa (1991) describes it this way:

> *There is just suddenly a general sense that something is happening here and now, and we are brought back. Abruptly, immediately, without a name, without the application of any kind of concept, we have a quick glimpse of changing the tone. That is the core of the mindfulness-of-effort practice.* (pp. 38-39)

There is effort involved, but it may not be the kind we are used to. It is more like tuning in. We are willing to be mindful. We understand the value of mindfulness and we have an intention to keep coming back. Like transformational leadership itself, we neither control so tightly that we squeeze the life out of ourselves and others; nor do we abandon ourselves and our projects to whatever habitual impulse comes our way. Both extremes become reminders to return to a middle path: alert and relaxed; not too tight, not too loose.

Mindfulness of effort involves intentionally creating conditions—a culture of awareness—rather than simply driving down a linear path towards a goal. It also involves courage, because even though our preoccupations and struggles are distracting and get us into trouble, at least they are familiar. Applying mindfulness of effort takes away our security blanket. We have to be willing to let go of ego's false ground.

Simplicity

Trungpa (1991) describes the fourth foundation, *mindfulness of mind,* as "intelligent alertness," "aroused intelligence," and as "being with your mind." This foundation highlights the precise simplicity of mindfulness. Fundamentally, we can only be in one place at a time. We are either present to what is happening or we miss it. This realization comes with a healthy dose of humility:

> *We think we are great, broadly significant, and that we cover a whole large area. We see ourselves as having a history and a future, and here we are in our big-deal present. But if we look at ourselves clearly in this very moment, we see we are just grains of sand—just little people concerned only with this little dot which is called nowness. We can only operate on one dot at a time, and mindfulness of mind approaches our experience in that way.*
>
> (Trungpa, 1991, p. 53)

Even mindfulness can be another way of fragmenting our attention. We split ourselves into watcher and doer. In reality, there is always just one thing going on, a "one-shot deal." Multi-tasking is therefore a sleight-of-hand, an illusion:

> *It is easy to imagine that two things are happening at once, because our journey back and*

> *forth between the two may be very speedy. But even then we are doing only one thing at a time. We are jumping back and forth, rather than being in two places at once, which is impossible.*
>
> (Trungpa, 1991, p. 46)

From a practical point of view, maintaining the illusion of being in more than one place at once drains mental energy and is counterproductive. Switching back to a neuroscience lens, research tells us that rapidly shifting back and forth between cognitive tasks results in plummeting capacity and rising levels of error. The only way to maintain performance is to transfer all tasks but one to parts of the brain that can function on autopilot. So, for example, we can drive a car while working on a solution to a problem. But even this can be a poor use of mental energy. We arrive at our destination slightly spaced out, because our prefrontal cortex, which is an intensive energy consumer, is already tired, and because body and mind (or different parts of our brain) are out of sync.

Our body-mind system is our personal leadership instrument, capable of sensing, attending, knowing, learning, and acting with sensitivity and accuracy. This instrument functions at its best when it is not hijacked by the impulses of ego. As leaders, we are more resilient, compassionate, and intelligent when we are grounded in mindfulness of body; when we "touch and go" in response to habitual tendencies and reactive impulses; when we maintain an alert, relaxed self-awareness; and when we tune in to the simplicity and potency of nowness.

Mindfulness and Transformation

Mindfulness is an age-old practice that can be used in support of a spiritual path, a leadership path, or simply a path of becoming more fully human. Mindfulness relates directly with the ongoing, universal fear of uncertainty, which, if left unchecked, distorts perception, freezes intelligence and learning, and leads to spiraling interpretation, emotion, and reaction. As leaders, we can observe all these tendencies in ourselves, and we can readily see how these tendencies become amplified in our organizations and societies. In these times of great change, the need for alternative ways to manage uncertainty is critical.

Most, if not all, practices and methodologies of transformational leadership contain elements that we can recognize in the four foundations of mindfulness. As leaders, we intuitively know that we need to establish enough ground, enough trust and continuity, for people to be able to explore and embrace change, and to step into a shared reality that is larger and more dynamic than the territoriality and impulses of ego. We need ways of uncoupling the seemingly solid links between the momentum of the past and the possibility of the present, and between assumption and reality, so that true innovation is possible. And we need structures, traditions, and rituals that sustain and continually refresh our efforts, without becoming overly rigid and burdensome. And finally, a culture of nowness arises when we are present in a simple way, whether in a circle check-in or while silently holding an open question in a planning retreat. Nowness is the incubator of transformation—of meaning, insight, courage, commitment, and synchronicity.

Perhaps what is less evident in either the mindfulness or neuroscience literature is the great bank of wisdom and compassion that becomes available when ego's impulses have been harnessed. This is the potential I have experienced most vividly in my encounters with great Buddhist teachers such as Chögyam Trungpa. Simply through their presence, these teachers provide a contrast to ego's small strugglings and a glimpse of a more enlightened way of being.

Although Trungpa died in 1987, his vision of a secular enlightened society sustained through personal and collective practices continues to inform a multitude of initiatives in the arts, business, health, and education. In every case, the premise is the same: When we harness the impulses of ego, we free up creativity and intelligence. Our institutions and communities become more alive and resilient. We are able to fully inhabit a world that is already transformational. We find ourselves present for that one-shot, straight-up reality from which there is no escape. ■

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