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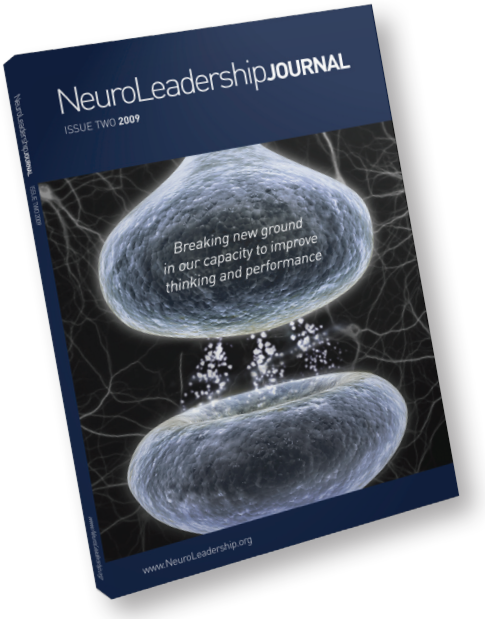

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Mindfulness as capacity: at the threshold of leadership's next wave?

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Introduction

The authors of this paper, Love and Maloney, met through their work as leadership development consultants working with the Microsoft Corporation. With the sponsorship of Lela Panagides, Director of People and Organizational Capability, they are developing a pilot program to introduce the concept of 'mindfulness' as a mental capacity which can be learned and cultivated, in order to enhance personal and leadership satisfaction and results. The authors share a combined forty years of experience in leadership roles and as organization development consultants and executive coaches, primarily in Fortune 500 companies including AT&T, Ernst & Young, GE, GlaxoSmithKline, Johnson & Johnson, Merck & Company, MetLife, The Coca-Cola Company, Wells Fargo and Tyco International. Love and Maloney work with leaders in positions ranging from mid-level to C-Suite level roles.

The intent of this paper is to propose a new framework for leadership development; one that builds upon best practices in the field of leadership development, yet raises the bar to consider what might be next in the theory and practice of leadership, particularly in light of research taking place in the field of neuroscience. We propose the idea and the possibility of a 'mindfulness threshold': an emerging level of readiness/willingness of leaders to explore more powerful methods of expanding their own 'mental capacity' (i.e., as in the findings of neuroscience related to mindfulness and the brain's ability to function at optimum, more objective, creative and broader levels). The authors' hope is to raise additional questions for research that will both further the current understanding of the impact of mindfulness training, and deepen the ability of leadership development practitioners to design training that targets specific areas of the brain for measurable results.

The need for great leadership

Management research has long documented the far-reaching impact of leaders upon organizations, business and society. Over the last 18 months, the reality of short-sighted and unethical leadership has become the headlines of nightly news as evidenced by the Wall Street debacles, bank failures and auto company bankruptcies. Given this context, the need for a better pool of leaders who can think and act broadly and ethically may be one of the imperatives of our time. Yet two key factors threaten our collective ability to source and deploy our best and brightest, just when they are needed most.

The first factor is a *drain on* the pool of available leadership talent. Global demographic trends are generating a talent deficit that will continue for at least a decade or more. For professionals in the age category between 35 and 49; the traditional pool from whom emerging and future leaders are sourced; forecasts are for minimal to negative growth in this cohort. By 2015, demographic shifts are expected to result in a 15% reduction in ready talent (Lombardo and Eichinger, 2004).

The second factor is that talent is *being drained* – physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually (Loehr and Schwartz, 2003). Across the globe, people today deal with a veritable tsunami of chronic high-stress, increasing complexity, information and communication overload, rapidly evolving

technologies, and a hyper-competitive, 24/7 work world (Hallowell, 2006). Anecdotal feedback from leaders who engage with us in coaching and training work across multiple companies and industries is that they too often feel that they are operating at 'the limit' or near a 'breaking point'. Even the smartest, most senior leaders are struggling to keep up to the point that they often don't know what decisions to make or actions to take (Welbourne, 2006). Leaders are trying to achieve more with much less, primarily by defaulting to various forms of multitasking and hoping that technology (from their ever-present Blackberries to their Outlook email and calendar) will save them. These tools will only take leaders so far; what is really required is a fundamental re-thinking of how leaders value and use their mental capacity (Rock, 2009).

Just as the world is demanding exponentially more of leaders, the tools and methods of leadership development must expand as well, especially if demographically the pool of leaders is indeed smaller, it makes sense to ask how we can leverage that talent most efficiently, effectively and for maxim impact. Our professional experience suggests that while a majority of leadership training programs focus appropriately enough on increasing leadership *capabilities* (skills), too few address this growing need for increased leadership *capacity*. The dictionary definition of 'capacity'; 'the ability to receive or contain'; and 'the actual or potential ability to perform, yield or withstand'; leads us to an Internet analogy: too many leaders today are operating with the capacity equivalent of dial-up, when their world requires them to have the mental speed and bandwidth of DSL.

Building on the foundation: self-awareness and self-management

For several decades, the commonly accepted strategy and best practices in leadership development have included the cultivation of self-awareness and self-management abilities in leaders. That standard suite of leadership development tools and methods includes 360 degree feedback instruments and executive coaching.

Once considered trendy or soley for poor performers, executive coaching has become one of the most widely used processes in leadership development (Goldsmith, Lyons, and Freas, 2000; Thach, 2002), and has garnered respect both in public consciousness and with the neuroscientific community (Rock, 2006; Ringleb and Rock, 2008). Executive coaching frequently is driven by 'objective' data gathered from one or more sources, including performance appraisals, assessment tools and feedback on an individual leader's strengths and weaknesses. Feedback is usually geared toward creating greater self-awareness in individual leaders, as a necessary precursor to skill-building around pre-defined leadership competency models and measurable behavioral change. Additionally, over the years there has been extensive adoption of EI (emotional intelligence) and SI (social intelligence) tools and training (Goleman, McKee, and Boyatzis, 2002; Goleman, 2006) and recently a growing attention to a brain-based approaches to leadership coaching (Rock, 2006).

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Consequently, we hypothesize that the current pool of leadership talent has attained some degree of self-awareness and ability to self-manage (i.e., ability to self-regulate their thoughts, emotions and behaviors). This level of readiness, we hypothesize, could be better leveraged than we see being done currently, to take leaders to a new level of development. While the work done around self awareness and self management has laid a powerful foundation for future growth in leaders, the current level of leadership development can also be viewed as having hit a plateau.

What might motivate leaders and leadership practitioners alike to leave their comfort zone in search of the next big leap in leadership? We think one answer may lie in the second factor impacting leadership talent discussed earlier; the sustained and significant levels of stress impacting leaders' well-being, thinking and performance.

Stress: the problem and the opportunity

While the relationship between leadership and stress, recovery, performance and creativity is well documented (Yerkes and Dodson, 1908; Benson, 1975 and 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Loehr and Schwartz, 2003), only a small number of corporations today systematically address (in their leadership programs) stress management and/or best practices in expanding one's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities.

In terms of mental capacity specifically, leaders self-report to us that they are particularly struggling with their ability

to focus, be present, and to think as creatively and deeply as their business requires. Linda Stone, lecturer and former Apple and Microsoft executive, describes part of this mental struggle as an issue of 'continuous partial attention'; the habit of continually trying to focus on multiple things at once. She suggests that:

'Like so many things, in small doses, continuous partial attention can be a very functional behavior. However, in large doses, it contributes to a stressful lifestyle, to operating in crisis management mode, and to a compromised ability to reflect, to make decisions, and to think creatively.'

...deep breathing was taught as a means to expand an individual leader's mental capacity...

In response to client requests for help around such issues and challenges, Maloney has taught a series of workshops to over 600 high-potential leaders within Microsoft. These workshops included a simple, deep breathing technique. The deep breathing was taught as a means to expand an individual leader's mental capacity, in two primary ways; a) to reduce the impact of stress (shift out of limbic into higher brain functioning); and b) to increase mental focus by returning to the present moment, person or task at hand. This particular technique was chosen because it could be used as both a stress-reduction technique and as very simple mindfulness practice (breath awareness). As Maloney continues to train and coach inside the company, she has heard anecdotally and tracked through simple participant feedback surveys that that the deep breathing technique is the most valuable tool workshop participants take away and continue to use post-workshop.

Maloney's experience is in alignment with a growing body of mindfulness research, including the benefits of mind-based relaxation and mental training. Tang and Posner (2007) tested a type of mind-body meditation training against a control group taught only stress reduction. They found that the mind-body meditation (IMBT) not only reduced stress further than the stress reduction technique, but in addition boosted performance on mental tasks. The authors concluded that:

'IBMT is an easy, effective way for improvement in self-regulation in cognition, emotion and social behavior. It may have implications in schools, workplace and personal life. Our study is consistent with the idea that attention, affective processes and the quality of moment-to-moment awareness are flexible skills that can be trained.'

In terms of the effectiveness of mindfulness, researchers have historical precedence to stand upon as well. As Hassad (2008) states:

'Meditation 'research' began thousands of years ago when wise sages observed directly and intently their own experience during and more importantly, after meditation. Modern science seems to be catching up with what many have known for a long time: meditation is a powerful healing agent for mind and body.'

There is much yet to be tested and researched, including the underlying brain mechanism related to mindfulness, which is not yet understood (Tang and Posner, 2008). However, the potential applications of mindfulness as a leadership development tool for increasing mental capacity, at a minimum, is intriguing and of high value. Further research on mindfulness and its relationship to cultivating mind states that enhance leadership performance is an exciting, and perhaps even necessary, call to action.

Mindfulness – leadership's next wave?

It has been suggested that the research on mindfulness and its impact has been inhibited by the lack of an operational definition of meditation or mindfulness (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne and Davidson, 2008). Lutz *et.al (*2008) have proposed an operational definition or theoretical framework based on traditional meditation texts and their own Neuroscientific conceptions. They group standard meditation into two broad categories: FA, or Focused Attention, and OM, or Open Monitoring meditation. FA meditation involves directing and sustaining focus on a selected object (e.g. breath sensation) while detecting and monitoring distracters. During FA meditation one would disengage attention from distracters and shift back to the object (breath), while appraising the distraction in a non-judgmental manner.

OM meditation does not require explicit focus on an object, but rather nonreactive meta-cognitive monitoring (e.g. labeling the experience). There is a non-reactive awareness of automatic cognitive and emotional interpretation of stimuli. OM is seen as the representative of mindful meditation, which Lutz *et.al,* cite as having received multiple meanings. These two types of meditation represent several meditative traditions including Zen, Vipassana and Tibetan Buddhism. The practice of OM, or mindful meditation has been as cited by Lutz *et.al (*2008) as providing preliminary support for the possibility that continued practice may disrupt or inhibit automatic responses in appraisal systems, diminishing intensity or duration of

negative thoughts or rumination. Lutz *et.al (*2008) suggest that neurophysiologic changes induced by meditation training can be correlated with improvements in behavioral measures of sustained attention, such as functioning in continuous performance tasks.

Despite the definitional challenges, scientific research on mindfulness has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Brown, Ryan and Creswell (2007) found that mindfulness-based reporting in the psychological and medical research arenas had increased from 80 reports in 1990, to over 600 reports in 2006. Recent reviews and meta-analyses of the empirical literature suggest that interventions that incorporate mindfulness lead to clinically significant improvements in psychological functioning in varying populations (Baer, 2003, Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, and Wallach, 2004; Salmon, Sephton, Weissbecker, Hoover, Ulmer and Studts, 2004; Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda and Lillis, 2006). Benefits associated with the practice of mindfulness have included enhanced positive mood and reduction in negative moods (Tang, 2008). Preliminary evidence also suggests that mindfulness is associated with enhanced attentional control and other indicators of concentrative capacity (Brown, 2006).

...mindfulness and meditation have gone mainstream in medicine and popular culture.

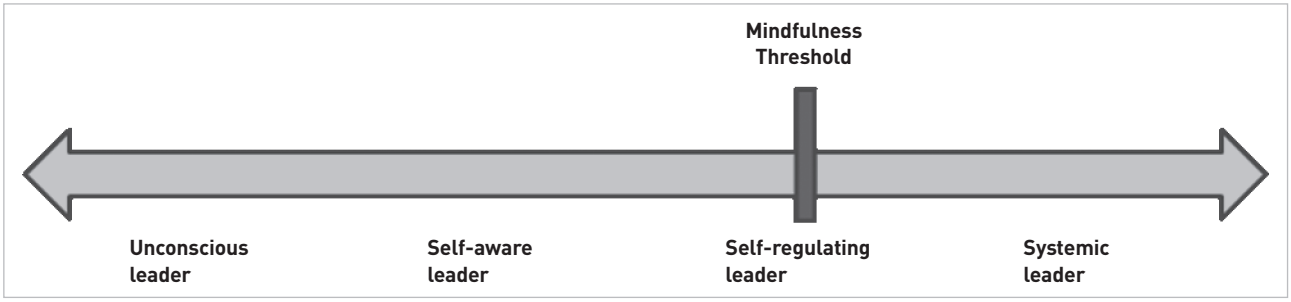
Concurrent with the growth of mindfulness research, mindfulness and meditation have gone mainstream in medicine and popular culture. Few mindfulness experts have advanced the acceptance of mindfulness as much as Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn and his colleague Saki Santorelli are widely recognized for their 30-year body of work related to Mindful Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) at the UMass Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (CFM). The Center is a natural outgrowth of the acclaimed Stress Reduction Clinic founded in 1979 at the UMass Medical School, and has successfully taught secular meditative practice to over 17,000 attendees of their programs, with research indicating that meditation increases relaxation ability, reduces pain, increases ability to handle stress, and facilitates long lasting decreases in physical and psychological pain (Santorelli, 2000; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Another hypothesis we propose here is that leaders may be more interested in and/or open to mindfulness-based techniques in part because they may have been exposed to these techniques already, through the media, taking yoga or martial arts classes, and participating in health management programs through their doctor or corporate wellness initiatives.

Mindful meditation was referred to by the monks as an antidote for stress and depression...

Looking specifically in terms of the relationship between mindfulness and leadership, Love (2008) based her doctoral dissertation on her qualitative research with monks and lamas who practice Tibetan Buddhism, and who held roles that require management and leadership. Mindful meditation was referred to by the monks as an antidote for stress and depression, the differentiating factor in happiness versus unhappiness, the way to calm down, the way to gain wisdom, and a way to find purity and clarity. The monks reported that mindfulness helped them to slow down the decision making process and find key questions from which to generate positive action.

Love found that the monks interviewed cited issues similar to those of corporate executives she works with, including stress related to finances, fundraising, cultural diversity, and working with people in directly reporting relationships and committees. The monks perceived mindful meditation as contributing to their effectiveness by clearing, calming, focusing and stabilizing their minds as these issues arose. Their practice was seen as fostering improved relationships and control of negative emotions.

The monks also reported that mindfulness was not only the act of mindful meditation, but was in fact *a capacity developed as a result of meditation* that allowed for the continued 'watching of the mind'. This consistent mind-watching, or self-monitoring, was seen as a way to align thoughts with actions and ethical beliefs. When incorporating simple mindful techniques into her work with individual leaders at Microsoft and elsewhere, Love has had positive feedback related to an increased sense of well-being and ability to redirect attention. Although anecdotal, this feedback, along with the self-reporting feedback given to Maloney, has been the impetus to develop the pilot mindfulness program for Microsoft executives.



The mindfulness threshold: a proposed framework for leadership development

Given the historical focus of leadership development (on self-awareness and self-management); current mindfulness practice and research (as cited previously); and the authors' own experience helping corporate leaders deal with stress-overload in their work and lives, we have come to some fundamental questions:

- Is the 'pull' factor of increased self awareness/self management meeting the 'push' factor of chronic /high stress-levels, in a way that can motivate fundamental change in leaders?
- Could that change include a new transition point in their evolution as leaders; a 'mindfulness threshold' to more expansive and effective ways of thinking and leading?
- Conversely, what will happen if leaders don't change, but continue to try to function from the level of capability and capacity at which they now operate?

As a visual, we can propose the framework above for further dialogue, research and application with leadership practitioners and neuroscientists interested in mindfulness and leadership.

Summary of framework's key points:

- Widespread use of 360 feedback, executive coaching and EI training over past 20 years has created a pool of relatively self-aware leaders.
- These tools have moved leaders from a state of 'unconsciousness' about who they are and how they impact others, to some degree of 'self awareness'. (An unconscious leader could also include a leader who has not yet had had the benefit of the assessments and training which are the foundation for the EI and mindfulness training.)
- By applying increased self-awareness to better self-management of their own behavior, leaders achieve some degree of self-regulation.
- However, chronic over-stress that goes unaddressed may drive leaders back towards less conscious thinking and behavior. But stress that is acknowledged and proactively managed (including using deep breathing and mindfulness techniques) may help motivate leaders to move across a 'mindfulness threshold', to develop an increased ability to access and apply higher-functioning mental states.

These tools have moved leaders from a state of 'unconsciousness' about who they are and how they impact others, to some degree of 'self awareness'.

- These higher mental states may reflect key characteristics attributed historically and through scientific research to 'mindfulness', such as a greater capacity for present moment awareness, compassion, ethical decision making, and systemic/integrative thinking. Behaviorally, this may for example look like: learning how to exercise more control over their thinking processes; increasing ability to focus and minimizing distractions; slowing down emotional reactions to negative stimuli; and self- shifting mind-body into healthier states that support the objective, creative, executive functioning of the pre-frontal cortex.
- If leaders do in fact arrive at this point (this threshold) both highly capable (self-aware and self-managed) and highly motivated (stress-driven), what then is required to help them make the leap? How could leadership development methods and tools most easily and effectively move them to the next level of leadership? These and other questions require further research.

In summary, we hypothesize that, at the Mindfulness Threshold (with some introduction to mind-training, mindfulness, and/or meditation techniques) leaders might cross a breakthrough point on a continuum of higher mental states of leadership. This leadership continuum we believe is not unlike what the Mind-Life Institute; an on-going dialogue between the Dalai Lama and neuroscientists; describes as 'the cultivation of positive human qualities – mindful awareness, self-control, social responsibility and concern for the welfare of others'(2009).

In terms of leadership, we propose for further exploration, through this Mindfulness Threshold framework, a parallel continuum of characteristics for leaders such as increasing levels of self-regulation, emotional intelligence, systemic/integrative thinking, greater compassion and ethical leadership. At this point, in terms of leadership, what lies beyond mindfulness is still unproven and yet quite hopeful.

A call for further research

We have offered in this paper an imperative for change in how we develop leaders, and proposed several hypotheses about what that change might look like; questions that require further research. In terms of future research, if a question can be considered a 'bottom line', the following would be ours: Could mindfulness training help leaders not only reduce stress and increase their mental performance, but make them more compassionate and ethical leaders as well?

...leaders and leadership teams who practice mindfulness will be the ones who show break-through results.

Our hope is that this paper will serve as a catalyst for many more such questions for research and study, by neuroscientists alone and in partnership with leadership practitioners. Future research could help leaders and leadership practitioners as well by considering also:

- How to measure the 'threshold'; aka exactly when and how does a self-aware and self-regulating leader become 'mindful'?
- The 'dosage' of mindfulness training required and the degree of lasting change it can produce
- Developing best-in-class techniques to teach executives the practice of mindfulness, in ways that respect the limited time and resources available to executives
- Measuring changes in body-mind behavior, during and after mindfulness practice
- Measuring business and organizational ROI related to the development/application of mindfulness

We believe that such research would find a willing and grateful audience. Speaking from the front lines of leadership, Ms. Panagides of Microsoft says: 'I predict that leaders and leadership teams who practice mindfulness will be the ones who show breakthrough results. These will be the teams that create healthier organizations, tap into innovation and creativity and who inspire those who work for them to know their passion – which all lead to a bigger place.' Only research, practice and time will tell. But perhaps the time to try is indeed now.

'I believe attention is the most powerful tool of the human spirit. We can enhance or augment our attention with practices like meditation and exercise, or diffuse it with technologies like email and Blackberries, or alter it with pharmaceuticals. In the end, however, we are fully responsible for how we choose to use this extraordinary tool.'

Linda Stone

About the authors

Angela Love is the principal and founder of the Daymark Group, an organization development and executive coaching firm dedicated to serving Fortune 500 companies internationally. Dr. Love has over 20 years of experience in Fortune 500 corporation management, consulting, and leadership development. Her doctoral research and dissertation focused on mindfulness and ethics and she often incorporates mindfulness and meditative practices in her work with corporate executives and teams.

Julie Maloney is CEO of High Potential Executive Coaching, a leadership training company that specializes in developing top talent, from green (high potentials) to great (high achievers). For over two decades, Ms. Maloney has coached and trained leaders across the spectrum of requirements for executive maturity and peak performance, including managing successful role transitions/first 90 days challenges; using 360 feedback to improve current job performance; developing new leadership skills; increasing self awareness and interpersonal skills; and sustaining performance through greater work/life balance. Her passion is expanding leaders' mental capacity through the practices of mindfulness and mental down-time (whitespace).

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