

A Mindful Approach to Performance Enhancement

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Companies such as Raytheon, Proctor & Gamble, Unilever, Nortel Networks and Comcast¹ have started to integrate mindfulness into the workplace, highlighting the growing mainstream interest in this fascinating practice. While traditionally used in clinical domains, mindfulness is increasingly being applied in sport and business leadership to enhance well-being and performance. For athletes, it brings improved performance and for leaders it enhances their effectiveness in decision making, relationship management, work life balance and sustainable leadership. This article draws from current literature to explore mindfulness and how this innate quality within all of us can be cultivated to improve our present-moment focus and ultimately enhance performance in sport and business leadership.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

With its roots in both Eastern philosophical traditions and Western psychology, mindfulness refers to a

way of being – non-judgementally (i.e. not good, not bad) paying attention to and being aware of present events and conscious experiences. It is a philosophy and a practice that can be developed through simple exercises that actively encourage non-judgemental attention and awareness of internal (such as bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions) and external (such as sights and sounds) experiences in the present moment.

THE LINK BETWEEN MINDFULNESS AND PERFORMANCE

Mindfulness practice is founded on the basis that one's thoughts, feelings and sensory experiences should be considered as naturally occurring events. These events regularly come and go as normal, expected features of human existence and therefore should not be controlled for. In this manner, mindfulness is contrary to traditional mental techniques that aim to control, eliminate or suppress negative thoughts and images. A growing body of studies

in sport psychology have indicated the positive performance effects of mindfulness training interventions.² This research has linked mindfulness to present-moment focus – the foundation of peak performance in sport. The ability to focus on a specific task while ignoring distractions from the past, future and other current events enables an individual to completely immerse themselves in their performance which can ultimately lead to performance improvements. Other benefits of mindfulness training include having clearer goals, a greater sense of control, enhanced concentration and a loss of self-consciousness.³

MINDFULNESS IN LEADERSHIP

Not surprisingly, due to the growing interest in how individuals focus their attention in organisations and the subsequent effects, mindfulness is also proving of relevance to the workplace.⁴ Given that mindfulness brings clarity, vividness and options to how we view and respond to the world, cultivating it provides leaders

¹ Carroll, M. (2011). *The Mindful Leader: Awakening Your Natural Management Skills Through Mindfulness*. Trumpton: Boston & London

² Bernier, M., Thienot, E., Codron, R., & Fournier, J.F. (2009). Mindfulness and Acceptance approaches in sport performance. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 4, 320-333.

³ Aherne, C., Moran, A.P., & Lonsdale, C. (2011). The effect of mindfulness training on athletes' flow: An initial investigation. *The Sport Psychologist*, 25, 177-189.

⁴ Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K.M. and Obstfeld, D. (1999). "Organizing for High Reliability: Processes of Collective Mindfulness" in R.S. Sutton and B.M. Staw (eds), *Research In Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 1 (Stanford: Jai Press, 1999), pp: 81-123



with ways of ‘doing and being’ that are potentially more effective. For example:

- By allowing us to be fully present, it improves our ability to break from unhelpful habitual patterns and the way we have always done things
- As it improves the quantity and quality of our awareness and attention, it opens us up to new information
- It weakens our tendency to over-simplify and encourages us to explore issues from multiple perspectives, providing us with flexibility and choice
- This heightened awareness helps us to consciously choose our behaviours and make decisions, appropriate to the context

In particular, it has been suggested there are four key areas where mindfulness could be beneficial in enhancing leadership effectiveness:⁵

- **Decision making:** how mindfulness enhances one’s ability to make decisions which are ethically aligned
- **Relationship management:** how mindfulness brings greater empathy and compassion, and is beneficial in interpersonal relations, conflict and crisis management
- **Work-life balance:** how mindfulness increases one’s ability to cope with stress and enhance wellbeing
- **Sustainable leadership:** how, through enhancing our interconnectedness with others and nature, mindfulness plays a critical role in developing and nurturing sustainable approaches to business

**DEVELOPING MINDFULNESS –
A PRACTITIONER’S PERSPECTIVE**

There are a number of ways in which we have worked with leaders to develop their mindfulness. Whilst meditation has traditionally been recognised as the key route to mindfulness, it can also be nurtured through informal day-to-day practice. Here is a selection of offerings to help you on the way:

1. **BREATHING:** to help you be ‘in the moment’, draw your attention to the thing that is always with you – your breath. Feel the air come in and out of your nostrils, noticing the rising and falling of your belly. One mindfulness exercise you can do is the ‘take ten breaths’ technique. Throughout your day, try and take 10 slow, deep breaths, noticing the physical sensations, thoughts and feelings passing through your body and mind. Remember to just observe (not judge, avoid, hold onto or suppress) and notice what it’s like to do this with an attitude of acceptance.
2. **NOTICING:** generally our minds flick from the past to the future, we ruminate, speculate, judge and evaluate. Start noticing how your mind flicks and when it ‘runs away with you’ and gently bring yourself to the present. One simple mindfulness technique you can use is the ‘notice five things’ exercise. Look around your environment and notice five things you can see. Now listen carefully and notice five things you can hear. Now notice five things you can feel (e.g. your feet on the floor). You can do this for all your senses.

3. **TURNING UP AND BEING**

PRESENT: breath into the present, notice your posture, your ‘beingness’ and turn up fully giving all your attention, without distraction or judgement, to the person or task before you. The ‘body scan’ exercise is useful for practicing being present. After a number of deep breaths, direct your attention to different parts of your body for one or two minutes each (you can start at the toes and work your way up). Whilst remaining aware of your breathing, notice any sensations you have in the different body parts non-judgementally.

4. **ADOPT A ‘BEGINNERS MIND’:**

this is the ability to see a situation freshly, as if for the first time. Ask yourself – am I seeing this person/these things with fresh eyes, as he, she or it really is – or am I only seeing the reflection of my own thoughts, memories of this person/thing? (We acknowledge this is not always an easy task!)

5. **START A ‘MINDFULNESS’**

JOURNAL: the practice of mindfully viewing events and situations of the day in retrospect enhances our ability to mindfully experience events and situations at the time they occur.

Mindfulness cannot be theorised but has to be experienced to be understood and as with any technique or tool, it is about the individual ‘trying’ it out and finding what works for them. Think of yourself as a ‘work in progress’, adopting a mindset open to personal change and acceptance and you too can start to experience the numerous benefits associated with this ancient practice.