MINDFULNESS IN LEADERSHIP: AN INTRODUCTION

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The fundamental assertion of my research is that mindfulness helps enhance leadership effectiveness and will be particularly important and relevant for global leaders facing the challenges of the 21st century. The study will review what mindfulness is from both Western and Eastern schools of thought, explore the areas of convergence and divergence between the two and present a possible integrated definition and conceptual framework.

To start...

Leadership trends

The fascination with leadership theory and practice continues. As Bennis (1959: 259-260) observed

“Of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination. And, ironically, probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than about any other topic in behavioural sciences.”

While there is no intention to summarise the extensive work that has already been done, it is interesting to look at leadership trends, in order to contextualise the study.

Past, present and future.

If leadership trends could be encapsulated in one quote, perhaps it is best expressed by Indira Gandhi, who allegedly said “I suppose that leadership at one time meant muscle; but today it means getting along with people”. Broadly (source: various), leadership theory began with the ‘Great Man Theory’ that leaders emerge in crisis, then moved to Trait theory which took the view that some people are born with traits which are more suited to leadership roles. From the Second World War, leadership was seen as a quality that could be developed and various theories emerged focusing on behaviours and situations (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969). In the 1990s a fundamental
distinction was made between transactional and transformational leadership, the former often being about ‘stuff’ and numbers, and the latter about people and change (Bass, 1990). Following on from this, there is recognition that there is no one paradigm which can be used to understand, explain and predict leadership and leader behaviour, but what is felt to be important is authenticity in a leader and their ability to engage hearts, mind and souls. Furthermore with the increased complexity, connectivity and globalization of the world, and global power shifts, there is an appreciation of ‘fusion leadership’ (Kin, 2008) which involves integrating theories and practices from both Western and Eastern cultures to help global leaders face the challenges of the 21st century.

Mindfulness – defining it and the field of study

Whilst it is an age old concept, mindfulness is a relatively new study in the fields of psychology, consciousness and management studies. Research in the West began with health and clinical applications in the mid 1970s (for example Langer, 1989; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Since the 1990s its applications have expanded into healthier populations such as elite sport (Thompson et al, 2011), organisational studies (Weick et.al, 1999, Krieger, 2005) and slowly to leadership and management (Kernochan et al, 2007).

So what is mindfulness? Indeed one of the research challenges is that there is no agreed definition of the construct. This is partly due to the nature of mindfulness itself, and because there are broadly two recognised divergent schools of thought – an older conceptualisation originating from the traditional contemplative and meditative practices of the East and another with its roots in Western psychology. Examples of how these two schools define mindfulness are provided by two prominent North American researchers (and practitioners) respectively:

“paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994: 4)

a cognitive state that employs creation of new categories, openness to new information, and awareness of more than one perspective (Langer, 1989).

Recently researchers have recognised that these schools are not necessarily incompatible and that integration between the two is possible (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006; Weick and Putnam, 2006; Dane, 2009). From the perspective of this study, this would not only represent a fusion between East and West, but would also offer a philosophy and practice, that may help global leaders operate more effectively in an increasingly diverse, connected and complex world.
‘Purists’ and Integrators’

Whilst the application of mindfulness in leadership is in its infancy in Western research, a review of the literature to date, suggests there are two possible groupings, which for purposes of this review, are referred to as ‘Purists’ and ‘Integrators’.

‘Purists’

These are the management researchers and authors who have explicitly referred to mindfulness, arguing it is the essence of the leadership approach, of which there are few. For example Dhiman (2009) observed that critical scholarly studies assessing the role of mindfulness in the field of leadership and workplace, are currently non-existent. Scholarly works in this area include Weick and Putnam’s (2006) exploration of the benefits of bridging Western and Eastern approaches to mindfulness in organisations, and Kernochan, McCormick, and White’s (2007) research which explains how three different management educators incorporated aspects of Buddhism, notably compassion, mindfulness and selflessness, into their teachings.

Probably one of the most visible mainstream mindful leadership books is Carroll’s (2008) ‘The Mindful Leader’. He argued that it is important to cultivate our nature talents and identified 10 leadership talents that emerge from meditation being: Simplicity, Poise, Respect, Courage, Confidence, Enthusiasm, Patience, Awareness, Skilfulness and Humility (Carroll 2008).
‘Integrators’

These are researchers and authors who have integrated mindfulness skills/attributes into their leadership thinking. Some are more explicit in their use of mindfulness as a term/concept than others. According to Dhiman (2009: 76) “a new generation of business leaders is turning to mindfulness as a cutting-edge leadership tool”. Examples of these works are summarised in the table below:

Table I: Selection of authors who reference mindfulness in leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Explicit/implicit reference to mindfulness in leadership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boyatzis and McKee (2005)</td>
<td>Argued that mindfulness is a source of renewal, a key tool in intentional change and an essential element of resonant leadership, essential for sustaining good leadership. Equated developing mindfulness with developing emotional intelligence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sadler Smith and Shefy (2006)</td>
<td>Advocated holistic principles for managerial development in terms of Tao, to provide a balance between Western and Eastern assumptions, values and traditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murthy, Neace and McKie (2007)</td>
<td>Presented the concept of ensemble leadership as a way to navigate a complex and unpredictable world. Argued mindfulness is one of the four principles and there are four enactments of mindfulness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waddock (2007)</td>
<td>Argued management education is currently focused on knowledge which is ill-suited for the divided world. Advocated post-conventional thinking cultivated through mindfulness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jagannathan and Rodhain (2008)</td>
<td>Argued that one expects a strong correlation between the emotional intelligence of a leader and his or her mindfulness. Leaders need a deep and abiding connection with others and with nature, which arises from mindfulness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldman and Schulyer (2010)</td>
<td>Proposed an integrated approach to leadership development consultation incorporating somatic awareness and intentional mind training as a foundation for acting with integrity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison (2011)</td>
<td>Argued the need to rediscover our lost qualities, which include death, stillness, intuition, wildness, vulnerability and surrender.</td>
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Mindfulness in leadership – reason to research

Using Jagannathan and Rodhain’s (2008) summary, there are four key areas where mindfulness could be beneficial in enhancing leadership effectiveness and which warrant further research. These are:

- **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 ones’ ability to cope with stress and enhance well being.

- **Eco-centric leadership**: how mindfulness plays a critical role in developing and nurturing a vision of sustainability that thrives on people-centric and eco-centric approach to business.

Figure II: Four key areas where mindfulness could enhance leadership

References


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