



**HARVARD
BUSINESS
SCHOOL
PRESS**

Mindfulness

An Essential Element of Resonant Leadership

EXCERPTED FROM

Resonant Leadership

BY

Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee

Harvard Business School Press
Boston, Massachusetts

ISBN-13: 978-1-4221-2634-9
2634BC

Copyright 2007 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

This chapter was originally published as chapter 6 of *Resonant Leadership*,
copyright 2005 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@hbsp.harvard.edu, or mailed to Permissions, Harvard Business School Publishing, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Massachusetts 02163.

You can purchase Harvard Business School Press books at booksellers worldwide.

You can order Harvard Business School Press books and book chapters online at www.HBSPress.org, or by calling 888-500-1016 or, outside the U.S. and Canada, 617-783-7410.

Mindfulness

IT IS JUST PAST DAWN in London, long before most people are awake. If you are up early, walking in Hyde Park, you are likely to see John Studzinski running with three big dogs. He is moving fast, enjoying the crisp air and the sights along the way. He stops and smiles while the dogs quickly sniff the grass and flowers, reading the canine version of the morning paper.¹

By this time in the morning, John (known to many people as Studs) will have spent time reading, writing, and meditating—an invigorating start to a very full day. By eight, he will attend a breakfast meeting then move on to ten or more hours of intense conversations, decisions, and action. Most evenings, you can find him sitting with friends and colleagues, all talking animatedly as they work together on important social issues: human rights, homelessness, poverty, even nurturing young artists.

John Studzinski is an intense, passionate, and successful businessman. He was at the helm during the years when Morgan Stanley Europe grew by a multiple of ten. Now he is CEO of the

Corporate Investment Banking and Markets Division of HSBC Bank and a member of the Group Management Board of HSBC. With his co-CEO, Stuart Gulliver, he has led dramatic change in the division. Some say these changes could define the industry in the coming years. In the meantime, the effort has resulted in noticeable and profitable improvements.

John is also known as a leader in the arts. He is a trustee of the Tate Gallery and the Sir John Soane Museum in London. As if this is not enough, John's real passion, some would say his real work, is social activism. He is the Vice Chair of Human Rights Watch, supports several local organizations in London and was granted Knight of the Order of St. Gregory by Pope John Paul II for his work with the homeless.²

John accomplishes more in one day than many people do in a week. So how does he do it? One thing that stands out is his acute self-awareness and keen insight about people and the world around him. He knows what is important to him, and why. He has figured out how to live his beliefs and values. He sees other people and situations *very* clearly. He notices what is happening inside him and around him. John is awake, aware, and actively attentive to himself, people, and situations. And he *uses* what he sees.

We call this mindfulness. Let us look now at exactly what mindfulness is, what it looks like, and how effective leaders cultivate it to manage the inevitable cycle of sacrifice and renewal—and to sustain their resonance.

Minding the Medicine Wheel

Mindfulness is the capacity to be fully aware of all that one experiences *inside the self*—body, mind, heart, spirit—and to pay full attention to what is happening *around us*—people, the natural world, our surroundings, and events.

In defining mindfulness we draw on two traditions: cognitive psychology and Buddhist philosophy. Ellen Langer, a Harvard pro-

fessor, uses the word *mindfulness* to describe a healthy state of cognitive openness, curiosity, and awareness.³ Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts comes at mindfulness from a slightly different perspective. Basing his work on ancient Buddhist traditions as well as modern psychology, neurophysiology, and medicine, he and his colleagues define mindfulness as “. . . moment-to-moment awareness.”⁴ In bringing these two schools of thought together, we are able to apply what can be a somewhat abstract concept to the actual *practice* of leadership.

In fact, mindfulness enables us to counter the effects of the Sacrifice Syndrome and is a first, and crucial, step in renewal. Awareness of one’s self enables us to notice the detrimental effects of power stress (and then, we can do something about it before it becomes a big problem). Attending to ourselves also enables us to stay the course—living healthily and in accordance with our values even when the pressure is on.

Living mindfully means that we are constantly and consciously in tune with ourselves—listening carefully to our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. The best among us consciously develop the capacity for deep self-awareness, noting and building on our understanding of our inner experiences. Attending to ourselves like this enables us to be very clear about what is most important to us; it allows us to engage our passion and build on positive emotional states. Attending carefully enables us to recognize early on when we are heading down the wrong path—toward allowing a slight compromise in our values, making a wrong decision, or ignoring our health. People who live mindfully catch problems before they become serious, because they pay attention to their inner voice: a voice that includes intuition, wisdom, and a subtle but very sophisticated analysis of what is going on in the world. Mindfulness means using all the clues available—our emotions, thoughts, physical sensations, in-the-moment reactions, and sense of right, wrong, justice, and injustice. Subtle, fleeting emotions as well as small, seemingly unimportant ideas are often terribly important, as is listening to our bodies.

4 Resonant Leadership

People like John Studzinski do this on a daily basis—in part by making sure they create quiet moments in their day to really tune in to what is going on *inside* as well as around them, and to then attend to those sensations, feelings, and thoughts.

It takes some effort to train oneself to be mindful. Some people, like John, deliberately organize their lives to include practices that help hone the skills of awareness, attention, and reflection. There is no one way to do this—meditation, prayer, listening to music, aerobic exercise, and being in nature all provide opportunities for openness to one’s quiet inner voice. One thing is certain, though—to develop your capacity for mindfulness, you must, as John says, “be comfortable with your own company.” You need to focus on yourself, and you need to spend time *alone*, as well as learning with others. If you are interested in exploring some of these practices now, you may want to turn to the exercises at the end of this chapter and in appendix B.

The importance of living life mindfully is not news—we have just forgotten some of the wisdom of the ages. Almost every culture around the world has some sort of scheme that helps people to focus on themselves holistically, in order to find peace within, create harmony in their communities and balance in their environments. In some native North American tribes, this scheme takes a compass-like form called a *medicine wheel*, in which each of the four compass points represents one of our essential elements: the rational, intellectual mind; physical body; emotions (heart); and spirit.⁵

What we are talking about, then, is both ancient wisdom and common sense: a deep understanding of ourselves allows us to act in ways that are not only meaningful to us but inspiring to others. Contrary to popular belief, cultivating the capacity for mindfulness is not just a nice-to-have or something to be done for private reasons: it is actually essential for sustaining good leadership. It can be one of the most important things we do, resulting in a step-wise change in our effectiveness as leaders. Maybe most important, when we attend to ourselves by developing our minds, taking care of our bodies, understanding and using the power of our

emotions, and attending to our spirituality, however we choose to do so, we can begin to reach our full potential as *people*.

So mindfulness starts with attending to one's self holistically. To be mindful, we must first wake up to our inner experience and attend consciously to these insights. But it doesn't stop there—mindfulness includes paying attention to *what is happening around us*; that is, being acutely aware and seeking deep understanding of people, our surroundings, the natural world, and events.⁶ Then, we must *do* something with our perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. John Studzinski does this through his work in human rights and homelessness, but also in the attentive, mindful way that he connects with the people he works with at HSBC.

John is acutely aware of the people in his world—coworkers at HSBC, clients, and colleagues in the arts and the social networks he leads. In fact, we believe a good bit of his success is due to his ability to tune in to the needs of others. Take clients, for example. John spends at least half his time reaching out to his key clients. He gets to know them as people, and he tunes in to their real business needs, constantly pushing himself to look beyond the obvious or the current situation. Surely, you might say, this is just common sense? Maybe so, but it is far less common in practice. In fact, many organizational cultures (maybe even society today) drive people to action, rather than reflection, which means that *real* listening is actually quite rare.

So for John and other mindful leaders, it is not just a matter of meeting with clients. It is a matter of connecting authentically with them, listening deeply to them, to the point that they can read and understand their clients' subtle messages, even their unformed hopes. Reading between the lines—while in an authentic and trusting relationship with people—is behavior that defines mindfulness. And for leaders, it brings effectiveness and success.

When we attend to ourselves holistically, and become more fully engaged with people, our communities, and our environment, it becomes much less likely that we will do harm and more likely that we will do good. Why? Because we are attending to balance, both inside ourselves and in the world around us.

Some people make mindfulness a way of life. It doesn't take a disaster or a radical change to get them refocused on what they believe in or what they want to do in their lives. They live with their eyes open—able to adjust their behavior gradually, adapting to new circumstances while staying true to their core beliefs and working toward their goals and vision.

Awake, Aware, and Attentive

Let's look at how John Studzinski cultivates and maintains mindfulness. As we have said, mindfulness means being awake, aware, and attentive. So, first of all, John takes mindfulness seriously by staying "awake" in every sense of the word: He takes *time* to observe, listen, and learn. And he focuses on his inner world as a way to get clear about what is important to him. He builds in time each day for reflection. He reads widely and spends time with political, social, spiritual, and business leaders. He spends some weekends working in a homeless center. The result: on a daily basis, at work and in life, he does not have to spend much time figuring out what is right and what is wrong. He is clear about who he is, what is important to him, what he cares about and about his beliefs.

Sometimes, people who are this clear about their beliefs become rigid. Not John. As he said to us in a recent conversation, "Never assume the status quo is right, especially when it comes to people and human dignity." In other words, never let yourself get boxed in by ideas—your own or others'. That is where awareness comes in—an approach that John applies to the wider environment. He not only watches trends in his business, he also constantly seeks to understand what is new, what is different in the environment *around* the business. He seeks out people who are different from himself and opinions that are different from his. He goes out of his way to work with and befriend people of all ages, enabling him to learn from the multiple perspectives that different generations bring to conversations. In essence, he not only seeks

newness and variety, he considers it, notices what is relevant, and adapts himself to constantly changing situations.

As John puts it, “No two situations are the same, no matter how similar they may appear. It is easy to assume that because things look more or less the same, they are indeed the same. You have to see how and when things, and people, have changed. If you were to direct the same play twice, and the actors changed, you’d actually have a different play. It is no different in business—to deal with the new play you need to observe people and the context very, very carefully, looking for those subtle signals that let you know what people are thinking and feeling, what is happening in the wider environment. Then, you have to take what you see and interpret it in the context of this new environment.”

In business, this is easier said than done. It is difficult to stay focused and attentive to your “inner voice” or the wider environment when you have, say, lost a contract or disappointed a client. And even in day-to-day life and work, very little is crystal clear; things just move too fast to be totally predictable. John’s point, however, is that these are exactly the situations that most require attention and openness. In other words, they require you to truly “attend” to them. Those moments when you feel pressed for time or vulnerable, angry, or baffled are exactly when you need to be most receptive, exploring what happened, who did or did not do what to whom, and the subtle impact on the wider environment. Oddly, it is often the quiet, subtle, disturbing feelings that are the messages we need to listen to most closely. This, too, is hard—when we have that nagging sense that something needs to be done, changed, or understood differently, we often discount our intuition, especially if the facts don’t add up or the messages we are sensing make us uncomfortable.

Being open to learning, especially learning from failures, requires courage. And living mindfully requires resilience. As we saw in chapter 3, shutting down, becoming defensive, and creating dissonance can be the default response to the pressures of a leader’s role. Mindfulness, then, is both an antidote to shutting

down (and creating dissonance) and also a necessary condition for resonance.

So how do leaders really *use* mindfulness in practice? What are the ways in which mindfulness can be used to help us renew ourselves and counterbalance our natural tendency toward continual self-sacrifice? How does mindfulness help us maintain resonance?

Let us examine two situations that leaders commonly face and in which mindfulness can play a critical role. One of our examples depicts the importance of being highly vigilant when you are navigating in unknown territory. The other shows that mindfulness is crucial when you need to understand the particular environment in which you are working and those with whom you are working.

Navigating the Unknown

When dealing with a crisis or the unknown, we simply cannot predict what is to come. It takes confidence and optimism to let go of preconceived notions while also studiously opening oneself to new information and solutions. The process of opening up can make us feel vulnerable, even afraid. Many leaders simply shut down in order to avoid this kind of uneasiness. Many shut down to prove to people around them that they are decisive and know what to do (even when they do not). Avoiding openness—and vulnerability—results in a narrow focus and can ultimately cause you to slip into mindlessness.

Most of us experience times when it seems easier to give up what we believe, step away from our principles and go along with the status quo. Sometimes, behaving in the politically correct way is a lot easier than staying true to ourselves. Then it becomes all too easy for people to demonstrate values only when someone is watching them or it is convenient. Sometimes we feel vulnerable simply because no one seems to see things as we do, and no one else seems to have the courage to stick it out and do the right thing. When we feel like this, it is easy to lose confidence in ourselves, to question whether in fact we are doing the right thing or

just being stubborn. Knowing where your personal line is, and also having people around you who share your values, whom you can trust and talk to, makes a huge difference.

Dan Sontag, vice president and head of the Advisory Business at Merrill Lynch, stepped onto what he referred to as “Wisconsin spring ice” when he began managing the private client business at Merrill Lynch. Why spring ice? Well, the landscape looked solid and safe, but in fact the surface was perilous, and just underneath the waters were raging. He was managing people who had just yesterday been peers, and he was doing it at time when the industry and the company were in turmoil. At Merrill, the new top team had defined a radically different strategy. Many of the old guard had left, and the web of relationships that had been the mechanism for influencing decisions was disrupted. Certain key aspects of the company’s culture were not standing the test of time. A new culture had not yet emerged, so those rules that guide behavior in small and large ways in a business were simply not as clear as they had been in the past.

When faced with this kind of turbulence, mindfulness becomes even more important. You need more, rather than less, information, and it is generally more difficult to get. You need to leverage your strengths and find those people who are succeeding despite the disruptions. You need to stay calm.

Dan’s response? He told us that he got very, very clear about those few core beliefs that had always guided his decisions and behavior, even in the midst of confusion and change. He also held onto the following tenets:

- Build trust through clarity and consistency.
- Make sure you *never* profess beliefs when people are watching, only to act differently when the temperature rises and the pressure is on.
- Know that you will feel uncomfortable, even vulnerable, because in the midst of real change around you, the rules are not clear and politically expedient behavior is very tempting.

It takes courage to stand on fragile spring ice, carefully choosing each step based on conviction. In high-pressure situations like Dan's, many people point outward: they find reasons for their problems outside of themselves. They blame others or the situation and they look for excuses. Good leaders point inward: they take personal responsibility for what is happening and what needs to be done, even when circumstances play a definitive role. Dan Sontag routinely asks himself, "What is my part in creating this situation and what do I, personally, need to do about it?"

Mindfulness starts with *self-awareness*: knowing yourself enables you to make choices about how you respond to people and situations. Deep knowledge about yourself enables you to be consistent, to present yourself authentically, as you are. We trust—and follow—people who are real, who are consistent, whose behavior, values, and beliefs are aligned. We trust people whom we do not constantly have to second-guess.

Honing the skills of mindful attention to oneself enables us to make better choices because we recognize and deal with our internal state—thoughts, physical sensations, and emotions. We are then better able to make sense of people and situations around us. Our perceptions are clear, not clouded by our own filters, biases, and unexplored or unacknowledged feelings.⁷ Through purposeful, conscious direction of our attention, we are able to see things that might normally pass right by us, giving us access to deeper insight, wisdom, and choices.

Understanding Your Environment and the People Around You

For a leader, each conversation and exchange is an opportunity to gather valuable information about people, groups, and cultures, while building relationships and resonance. Attending carefully to our human environment and our relationships enables us to see details we may have missed and generate more accurate ideas about what is really going on. We notice subtle patterns in people's behavior, group dynamics, organizational processes, and even world-

wide events. When we are mindful, we are more in control of ourselves and situations simply because we see reality more clearly.

Judi Johansen, president and CEO of PacifiCorp, an investor-owned utility company in the western United States, sees mindfulness as a way of life and a necessary baseline for success as a leader of a complex business.⁸ Some years ago, when she was still practicing law, Judi represented the “Lilliputians” in a case that would determine who would determine electric rates in one part of the country. At the low point, Judi’s clients were not even at the negotiating table, much less influencing decisions. Judi describes reading the situation this way: “I saw that the path they were going down was not going to get them where they wanted to go. I saw disunity in the group.” She saw that the one hundred or so representatives of the small companies did not share an agenda and as such could not possibly fight the big guys.

It would have been easy to attend to the loudest, most powerful voices in her client group, or to attempt to hammer out a common position by herself (she did know what she was doing, after all). But Judi was paying attention to the dance between people and groups. By listening to their conversations, watching how they interacted, and noting what they hinted about one another in one-on-one discussions with her, she saw subtle signs of competition and mistrust among the members of the group. She also noticed the opposing side’s quiet satisfaction in the face of this situation.

And Judi acted on what she saw. One memorable day, she managed to pull all one hundred-plus clients together in the parking lot of a hotel. Microphone in hand, she recounted what she had seen: the disunity, how it was not serving them, how their opponents loved every minute of it. She pointed out how obvious it was—to everyone except themselves. She called on them to reach across the competitive boundaries and join together as one voice.

It worked. Judi’s mindful approach to both the environment in which she was operating and the people with whom she was dealing—her careful awareness and attentiveness to this delicate situation—resulted in the group members putting their competitiveness

aside, getting a seat at the negotiating table, and ultimately achieving their aims.

Some years later, Judi found herself in yet another situation in which her mindful approach to the environment and people would be crucial: she was appointed as the first female administrator at Bonneville Power Administration, a federal agency selling electricity and setting energy policy affecting four states, fifty-two Native American tribes, investor-owned utilities, public utilities, numerous commissions, and various state and local governments. Talk about complexity: Judi's job was to create the blueprints for and then to build commitment to plans for allocation of finite resources across multiple constituencies with insatiable needs.

To succeed, Judi *had* to scan her environment. It was not enough to rely on the institutional folks whose job it was to monitor information and opinion. She had to get personally involved. She needed to be up close and personal—talking to people, listening to what was said as well as what was *not* said. Judi constantly assesses how people perceive things, noticing everything that goes on. She watches individuals and the dynamics between people. She tracks body language as carefully as what is said, noticing everything—even people's annoying habits at meetings, which can impart valuable information about their level of anxiety, competitiveness, acceptance or rejection of ideas and the like. She has trained herself to interpret—accurately—the conversation that goes on *behind* the words. When she studies people, she generates hypotheses about their underlying feelings, motives, relationships, etc. She tests her perception subtly, and when she is that much surer she really understands what is going on, she can act based on this deeper understanding.

In the end, she has succeeded time and again, managing to support the creation of numerous plans that optimize resources and that have not only met the needs of constituents but have also enabled them to make the necessary trade-offs at critical junctures.

Today, Judi's mindful attention to people and to her environment gives her the ability to truly understand the needs of her

organization and its constituencies. As she puts it, “Mindfulness is a way of life. This is what I do.”

Talking Without Words

Our subtle emotional and physiological responses are an important source of data, and at any given moment we are communicating a vast amount of information to one another about how we feel.⁹ Through infinitesimal changes in musculature and then facial expressions, we signal to others our true emotions, giving them clues about how to respond to us.

This communication is critical in facilitating social interaction. Paul Ekman, formerly a professor of psychology at the University of California San Francisco, has studied the emotions and facial expressions of people all over the world. He concludes that by attending carefully (we would say mindfully) to others we effectively minimize distortion. Rather than understanding people’s experiences through our filters, we see their feelings more clearly and we can more accurately interpret their thoughts and perspectives. When we do this, we are better able to relate to people because we are more in tune with *their* experience.

Leaders who read their world this way can more easily avoid uninformed, bad decisions and have a much better chance of successfully joining the dance and influencing complex group and organizational dynamics. Robert Polet understands this truth. When he accepted his new job as president and CEO of the Gucci Group, he turned his commitment to mindfulness into a powerful tool for resonance. One month after joining the company, he scheduled visits to nearly half of Gucci’s stores and offices, personally visiting more than twenty-five hundred people in a little less than four weeks’ time. Simply by showing up, listening, and sharing food and good conversation, he was able to convey who he was as a leader, thereby addressing the natural anxiety people feel as a result of a major leadership change. Equally as important, he took

the opportunity to really watch individuals and groups—noting the level of self-confidence and genuineness, whether people were “natural or acting” (his own words), and the degree to which they “owned” the business and approached it with passion.

The outcomes of this kind of scanning are at once obvious and subtle. Surely Robert’s people now know he will be a hands-on leader, deeply interested in their experience and the day-to-day reality of the business. Many of them also know him as a person. He is no longer the faceless, maybe scary, new CEO. They have shared food and conversation and laughter, and have seen that he is a real person who cares about them, and who wants to discuss their ideas about the business.

On a more subtle level, Robert quickly gained a sense of the *emotional reality* of his organization and the differences among the brand groups and across regions.¹⁰ He watched how people responded to leadership (his own and local managers’) and saw how best to use power effectively as he began to make some changes. Reading the environment like this enabled him to make early, and sometimes surprising, decisions about people. In fact, he found some of the best people in unlikely places and jobs and was able to rapidly involve them in his new organization. An organization chart would never have afforded him this highly accurate picture of who was who and what individuals could really do. Robert also gained a sense of collective values and history that are rooted in his observations, not just in what he has been told by those who hired him. He saw cultural norms in action, and was better able to adjust his own behavior quickly to build relationships in the organization. He is more likely to be able to avoid the cultural and relational landmines that exist in any organization, and is also more likely to capitalize on individuals’ and teams’ strengths. Additionally, he has found allies in unexpected places.

As Robert knows, watching the emotional dance among people gives you an edge. It gives you clues about what you are dealing with, and how to manage a situation. You can more easily decide when and how you interact to influence and guide people. This is equally true when we look at groups and cultures. Although more

abstract, and therefore harder to see and understand, these larger manifestations of the human system also dance: groups rely on other groups for information, decisions, and actions; cultures come together in harmony or clash inside organizations, as well as across geographic regions and the boundaries of belief.

Mindfulness, then, as people like John, Dan, Judi, and Robert have discovered, gives us an edge. But it is not something we are born with; it is something we learn, and something we can lose. If only it were easy to see when we are becoming mindless. Over the years, we have spoken with countless managers who, when things finally fall apart, sit bewildered and confused. They look around, find that they have plateaued, or maybe been laid off or cast aside. How did it happen? they wonder. What went wrong? Why didn't I see what was coming?

In chapter 4, we discussed wake-up calls. These are often the only prompt for action that some people recognize, and for many people they come late in the game—after problems have occurred and chances have been missed. Other people wake up but do not stay alert. Over time, they slip back into habits of inattentiveness, reawakening only if they experience another crisis. Becoming numb, or mindless, is often a slow, steady decline in awareness. The subtle messages that tell us something is not right can become mere whispers, and it may take years before we recognize that we are in trouble. Let us look at how this slow slide into mindlessness happens—and why.

Slipping into Mindlessness

“Steve” was a smart, dedicated executive who near the pinnacle of his career found himself cut off from the powerful team at the top of his organization. He had been doing the right thing for years, delivering results in a single-minded, no-holds-barred manner. He was proud of what he had accomplished. But over the years, he had slowly lost touch with the real goals of his organization. Like so many highly driven people, his personal ambition

took over. He slowly adopted patterns of behavior that irritated colleagues and clients alike, without even realizing how obvious his motives were. By the time he moved into senior management, the pattern was set: he was most often in a self-protective mode, and largely focused on his personal success. In this mode, he was intolerant of anyone who questioned him or expected him to open up to new ways of seeing or doing things. Steve had become clueless. He saw the world through his own, increasingly limited, perspective. He had slowly shut himself off from others and from awareness of the changing nature of his organization. He did not do this deliberately—he had become caught in the Sacrifice Syndrome and had not cultivated the capacity for mindfulness or renewal over the years. Nevertheless, Steve’s mindless behavior was *the* reason he was not invited to join the team at the top.

Steve’s story is common, and sad. What a waste of talent. Clearly, mindlessness is a problem on the job. But the problem does not stop at work. One of the saddest things we ever heard was a fifty-something executive talking with a younger colleague, encouraging him to pay attention to his children. He said, “I have completely missed out on my daughter’s youth. She’s twelve now, and I do not know what she likes to do, or what she thinks. I definitely don’t know how she feels about much of anything. Except me. I do know how she feels about me. She doesn’t like me much. She will not talk with me, does not want to spend time with me, does not have much good to say. I’ve asked her why, and all she says is ‘You haven’t been here all these years, why bother now?’”

How does this happen? How do some of us find ourselves waking up to a derailed career or an unhappy, distant family? In our work with leaders, we have tried to identify exactly what pushes good people into mindlessness and becoming trapped in the Sacrifice Syndrome.

There are several reasons leaders can easily lose their edge and slip into mindlessness, as Steve did. First, the pressures of the job are such that sometimes it is easy to get tunnel vision—natural cognitive processes coupled with the pressures of the job cause us to over-focus on some things to the exclusion of others. Second,

many of us find ourselves on the path of “should dos” rather than carefully attending to our deepest held beliefs and desires. And finally, because leaders are vulnerable and facing huge business risks daily, many people choose coping strategies that cause them to shut down.

Tunnel Vision and Multitasking: Gift or Curse?

People who are good at doing several complex tasks at once (reading an e-mail while talking on the phone while thinking about how to open the team meeting while weighing the pros and cons of the new strategy) are often valued in our organizations. They accomplish a lot. Multitasking is valued even more at the executive level. Leaders need to stay focused and efficient for months, sometimes years, on end. They have to keep lots of big ideas at the top of their mind, concurrently, including a huge amount of detail and information about their increasingly complex environment.

Many executives feel that mega-multitasking becomes a badge of honor. They consider distraction or even their secret desire for a break to be a sign of weakness. In fact, as advisers we are often asked for tips on how leaders can stay alert and avoid losing concentration over the long hours and months of unrelenting hard work. These executives skip vacations and don't even spend weekends away from e-mail, cell phone, and PDA. While becoming better and better at accomplishing more and more, many executives overdevelop skills associated with efficiency, which is then confused with effectiveness. Let us look at why this happens.

Keeping ourselves constantly focused is difficult; in fact, it is unnatural. Research has shown that the ability to stay intensely focused *declines over time*. That is why so many studies have been done regarding work-shift lengths in jobs that require absolute concentration, such as airport flight control.¹¹ Nevertheless, focus is valued and valuable, and many executives become exceedingly good at narrowing their attention and sustaining focus for protracted periods. The price of this effort, however, is that we literally train our minds *not* to notice what is going on around us.

When focusing too narrowly, people have little tolerance (or mental space) for unrelated thoughts. We ignore extraneous data, including internal thoughts and feelings and external information. The result, of course, is that we miss a great deal. We may not see subtle patterns, may not pay attention to the anomalies that can point us in a new direction or give early warning about problems. In essence, we can develop tunnel vision—seeing only what we need to see to reach the goal. This, of course, means we miss information that tells us that the goal (or the target, or the strategy) might need to change. We also miss new opportunities, or subtle signs that we need to reexamine our choices and paths in our professional roles as well as personal lives.

Unexamined, intensive focus can cause problems and can lead to mindlessness. But the desire to organize and prioritize information is natural, and we can improve how we do this—so we can focus without becoming mindless.¹² Our brains deal with the complexity of the world around us by filtering and categorizing information as it comes in. In an effort to simplify our experience and to make events more predictable we create mental categories that help us to process information—we label things, feelings, and experiences, even people. This cognitive process enables us to make distinctions easily, predict outcomes, and make “sense” of our experience. This cognitive process allows us to live in a complex world. Think about it. If we had to take in every bit of information discretely, all day long, we would be concurrently processing billions of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, feelings, thoughts, and then trying to link these with millions of memories, past experiences, etc. We would be paralyzed.

We now know that one of the first organizing structures in the brain is an emotional response to what our senses tell us. This response occurs as some of the “older” brain structures, such as the amygdala, process information and draw on emotional memories. Then, the information is guided to the appropriate segment of our neocortex for further analysis. At each step along the neurological pathways, our brains make choices about what we believe we have experienced.¹³

A simple example: Walking down the street, you see a large dog coming toward you. Your amygdala may react to the large animal quickly: fear pulses through you, your breathing rate increases, blood surges to your large muscles. In less than a nanosecond, however, the size and shape of the animal is processed by your neo-cortex, and you label the animal “dog.” If your past experience of dogs has been frightening, your blood pressure might go up. But if you have loved large dogs, your emotional arousal may be the exact opposite and you begin to experience caring and compassion. In either case, information processing continues as you take in other information: the leash that keeps the dog safely at a distance, the friendly person walking the dog, the fact that the person is your neighbor, the dog is familiar, you know the dog likes to play with your dogs. All of this happens almost completely below the surface of your awareness, and in less time than it takes to draw a deep breath.¹⁴

The process of assimilating information and categorizing it is thus a natural and largely unconscious process. So, what is the problem? This natural cognitive process can easily backfire. Mental patterns of analysis and interpretation are often habitual, and can be unrelated to real information.

A humorous example: Our young friend, Lucas—eighteen months old at the time—had recently learned lots of new words for common—and not so common—animals. “Cat” and “dog” were favorites—he could finally call to the beloved household pets. “Bear” was also a favorite word, but a bit scary, given some of the pictures he had seen. One day, his Aunt Abby visited, bringing her dog—named “Bear.” Imagine Luke’s dismay: he had finally mastered categories, and words to go with them, for dogs and bears, and here was this confusing situation. For a while, he simply refused to call the dog by name. Lucas is a very bright little boy, however, so with some coaxing he came to understand a new category—names! With this new category, he could accept a dog named Bear.

Even smart, rational adults can fall prey to outdated categories. In fact it is surprising how often our categories do not fit

reality, and how often we see what we think, rather than think about what we see. And if the two do not match we are confused. Some people (unlike Lucas) will actually try to force-fit the information they take in, making it fit their categories. This is a process called assimilation and though natural to a point, when overused it becomes the source of stereotypes and mindless interactions between people.

Let us look at how this plays out at work. We see it happen often on teams, especially teams that have worked together for some time. Over time, team members begin to form a shorthand way of interpreting one another's behavior and end up using this shorthand in a somewhat unconscious way. Team members might think, for example, "Oh, of course Scott would see the issue *that* way. He's a finance guy." Or, "Susan always supports Scott; we know what she will say, so let's not even attempt to bring her in." Or, "Mike always speaks first, thinks later." While any of these descriptions may be somewhat true, they are also stereotypes—automatic, fairly rigid prejudgments that limit our ability to see what is really happening.

Furthermore, we often see what we are looking for, and nothing more than that. This means that for the team in the example, Scott's opinion on the numbers will be heard, while his thoughtful comment on a succession issue is likely to be missed. When Susan sits next to Scott, it will be interpreted as support—even if she takes the last chair in the room. Mike's contribution will likely be discounted much of the time, and no one will notice the times he is fully prepared, thoughtful, and reflective.

On the other hand, mindful attention to how we make sense of the facts around us lets us make better judgments about what is truth, what is perception, and what is somewhere in between. But even those of us who remain open to new thoughts and ideas have often learned to overuse one source of "data": that which can be rationally explained. This is a result of over-focusing on data we process intellectually, as opposed to data related to our emotions or our bodies. Many of our educational and work organizations encourage this tendency in the quest for increased specialization.

But in the process, we lose sight of other important clues and real information.

Devoting greater mindshare to one aspect of our life or work may leave less room available for others. In our effort to be efficient, we are blind to anything unrelated to our focus. We often completely miss the creative solution; the new way of doing something; even the glaringly obvious, but novel, way of responding to a situation. When mindlessly concentrating, there is little room for subtlety. Slowly, over time, narrow focus and constant multi-tasking cause exhaustion: our mental processes are truncated and our emotional responses become unpredictable.

Patrick Cescau, CEO of Unilever, is about as intensely focused as they come.¹⁵ He manages the downside well, however, because of his absolute passion for learning. As he puts it, “Learning causes your world to open up, so you can see things a little bit differently.” But learning requires openness, opportunity, and time. Patrick hones the skill of learning by deliberately seeking new experiences and by consciously using life as a laboratory. He is passionate about exploration. Patrick applies this curiosity to the study of people. He watches people very carefully—their expressions and body language, what they say and how they say it. Then he tries to make sense of it: what they are feeling, what they are doing, and why they are doing it. He challenges himself to resist the urge to make quick judgments or assumptions about what people intend or want. He deliberately seeks multiple interpretations for people’s behavior, weighing his interpretations against what he actually sees, not what he wants to see. In other words, he consciously manages how he takes in information, how he interprets it, and how he reacts.

As Patrick will testify, this practice enables us to avoid the pitfalls of mindlessness and attend carefully to what is really going on in ourselves and around us. And we can learn how to do this better; it just takes conscious attention to our habitual thought patterns, curiosity, and discipline. As we do this, however, it is important to pay attention to other forces that can also push us into mindlessness.

Let us look now at a second way that people allow mindlessness to take over.

When “Shoulds” Lead to Compromises

“Justin” was a star. He whizzed through school, jumped through all of the hoops in his early career, and marched all the way to the CFO role by his mid-forties. In his company, this job had always been a stepping stone to the CEO position. However, to his great surprise, when his CEO retired, the board hired an outside candidate. Not only did he not get the job, the person who did was not interested in keeping Justin around. Justin was shocked. How could this have happened? He thought he was the perfect candidate. The board’s answer: “It’s a different world, now, and we need a different kind of CEO.” What did this mean?

Justin had created himself in the image of the ideal CEO: perfect career history, good results, normal family life. He even looked the part—handsome, well-groomed, a bit stern. Many years later, Justin recognizes the “shoulds” and “oughts” that drove him as he diligently went about building his career.¹⁶ He had done all the right things in school, courted a very nice young woman, driven himself to achieve goals at work, married, and started a family. He had good intentions, was doing the “right” things, and was living up to his own and others’ expectations. Surely there is nothing wrong with that. But like many driven and talented people, Justin was treating life’s big decisions almost as if they were on a checklist of to-dos that could be ignored once they were completed:

- ✓ University
- ✓ Find a mate
- ✓ Prove myself at work
- ✓ Have children
- ✓ Move up the ladder

But the problem is that learning does not (or at least should not) stop after school, and in fact our world requires that we constantly change and adjust to new and radically different circumstances. And, after we get married and have children, inattention to these relationships and neglecting the hard work it takes to keep them vibrant causes a lot of suffering. We see it all the time: people become more distant rather than closer over the years of marriage, communication becomes mostly instrumental—who needs to go where, what needs to be done in the house, that sort of thing. Children do not really know their parents, and parents are too busy to understand their kids. Relationships become sadly empty as making the right career moves and achievement for achievement's sake become our primary goals.

The worst thing about this kind of lock-step life is that we can begin to lose touch with ourselves and our understanding of what truly matters. Our noble purpose disappears and we wake up one day to find that we have little to ground and guide us.¹⁷

It is not that others' expectations and our responsibilities toward others are not important. They are. But when they preclude awareness of our own beliefs and desires, then we cannot attend to ourselves and we spend all of our energy and time fulfilling others' needs and wants. When this happens, we have essentially begun to close down, and, out of necessity, we develop defensive routines to help us get by.

We can become a shadow of the person we once were, playing roles rather than living authentically. Oddly, when this happens people often become strongly attached to ideas—even empty rhetoric—about roles, values, and principles while their real-life actions are far from ideal. Maybe they hold on to bad marriages because of a belief in the institution, while they quietly seek love and connection somewhere else. Or maybe on the surface they lead a life of integrity and publicly stand up for good causes, while cutting corners in their businesses and actually causing harm. Or maybe they just push on, pretending to be strong when inside they are crumbling.

So it was for Justin. During the years leading up to Justin's derailment, he had gradually felt less fulfilled at work, and home life was too much routine, offering too little excitement. Like many strong people, though, Justin felt he could handle his situation and he worked hard to avoid dealing with the truth: trouble at work and trouble at home. He did not know where to start. Maybe he was scared. Many of us are, for when we begin to realize that something is very wrong and that we must change, we often resist the inevitable. More defensive routines kick in: we get angry, we feel sorry for ourselves, we fight or we freeze. We become paralyzed by our own emotions. In these situations, we may, like Justin, slip into mindless seeking, going through life's checklist without thinking or feeling clearly. As we shut down, we often overlook key opportunities in life or work. We fail to spot the clues that tell us we need to pay attention, or change—as Justin missed the early messages from colleagues and the board that his behavior was out of synch with where the organization was going.

Fragile Self-Esteem and the Imposter Syndrome

For successful people one of the most common defenses is to take a key strength—self-confidence—and use it as a shield. For some, this means becoming brittle and self-protective. For others, it means living with a sense that one day they will be found out and people will finally see that they are not as good as they seemed. That was the case with “Nicole.” Nicole was the SVP of Research and Development for a large pharmaceutical company. She had started her career as a physician, but had quickly moved into the corporate world, seeing opportunities and the chance to make a difference on a broader scale. Over the years as a senior executive, she had faced many challenges—not the least of which were the constant reminders that she was the only woman on the senior team. Nicole adopted a defensive stance, deliberately over-achieving while relying on her talent, strong personality, track record, and a somewhat brittle exterior to keep threats at bay. This kind of self-protectiveness takes a lot of energy and depletes

our reserves. And having to prove oneself over and over can lead to chronic uneasiness—Can I overcome the next hurdle? Will we win the next battle?

As time went on it became harder and harder for Nicole to get things done. She was always ready for battle. The intricate relationships at the top of her organization required constant vigilance, attention, and even a kind of intimacy between people. Making the most difficult decisions required open dialogue and some vulnerability as team members made the hard trade-offs the business required. According to colleagues, Nicole's self-confidence and strength always seemed to get in the way of these conversations. Gradually, both she and her team members simply got tired of fighting and started avoiding each other. Then the catch-22 set in: the less contact she had, the less influence she could wield. And with less influence came more insecurity, more attempts to defend herself and more friction.

Whenever we encounter people who seem to need to prove their worth, even when their position or accomplishments actually speak for themselves, we begin to suspect that we might be dealing with someone who is quite insecure and overwhelmed. So Nicole's very evident confidence and brittle interpersonal style were clues: she was protecting herself.

In fact, it is often the case that people who seem most self-confident, whose self-esteem may even seem over the top, are the people who are actually the most fragile. Michael Kernis and his colleagues note that contrary to popular belief, unrelenting high self-esteem is not really an indicator of optimal self-esteem, and may in fact be "fragile high self-esteem."¹⁸ When people must continually protect an image of themselves, this is a clue that in fact they do not have a strong sense of self, and that they are delicate and even insecure, trying to hide from a threatening world.

We suspect that for many professionals, fragile high self-esteem can also be a byproduct of success. People who excel at school, and then in the workplace, often get a tremendous amount of positive feedback—more, maybe, than they think they deserve. Leaders may find themselves waiting for the other shoe to drop,

thinking that somehow people will figure out that they are really not all that great and the game will be over.

In our talks with executives, they often mention this “imposter syndrome”—that nagging sense that we are not really as good as everyone thinks we are.¹⁹ The more mindful leaders recognize the imposter syndrome for what it is and do not let insecurity drive them to bad behavior. But some people respond to the fear of being found out by developing superficial bravado and using over-the-top self-confidence as a shield. They ignore or hide their own weaknesses. They avoid putting strong people who might show them up on their teams and try constantly to get everyone to pay attention to how fabulous they are. Others build a wall; it is just too risky to let people in.

But mindfulness *requires* connection with other people. You cannot really understand others unless you are in contact with them. Many leaders find themselves deliberately shying away from close connection and relationships at work. They fear they will be found out or believe they will lose objectivity. Or they simply do not take the time. Or people just will not let them get close. For many reasons, building close relationships with people just seems wrong. It is tempting (and typical) for leaders to throw up their hands and give up on connecting. It is just too hard.

So it is easy to slip into mindlessness. The pressure of a leader’s role, coupled with internal messages about what we should do and our attempts to deal with stress, vulnerability, and insecurity cause us to shut down. Unfortunately, that response—shutting down—is exactly the opposite of what we must do in order to sustain effectiveness and maintain resonance in ourselves and with others. We need to be open, not closed—constantly exploring ourselves, others, and our environment. This enables us to stay centered and calm, even when the pressure is on, and to see what we must do in order to stay true to ourselves. Attending to others and the environment means we have more and more accurate information and can make better decisions. Mindfulness enables us to counter the effects of the Sacrifice Syndrome, propelling us into renewal.

Defining Your Practice: Cultivating Mindfulness

But becoming mindful and maintaining that state does not happen by accident. We are asked occasionally whether the development of mindfulness has a place in the business world. We answer with an enthusiastic, “Yes!” Mindfulness is the practical application of self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness; in short, developing mindfulness means developing emotional intelligence. What has been known and practiced for thousands of years in the world’s great religious and philosophical traditions is only now becoming known in the Western study of management and leadership. Self-awareness really does matter, and so does consciously managing our habitual thoughts, feelings, and responses.

As we have pointed out in this book and in other writings, self-awareness is a fundamental component of emotional intelligence that has a positive impact not only on our personal development and well-being, but on the bottom line as well. So, mindfulness is not just a nice-to-have—it makes a difference in performance.

Assuming we have a desire to develop our capacity for mindfulness, what can we actually *do*? We know from our practice and that of our colleagues that there are many paths to mindfulness, from purely cognitive “training” to Buddhist meditation practices to corporate programs such as working with a coach. We recommend a combination of reflection, practice, and supportive relationships. Adjusting one’s thought patterns is usually necessary, since most of us have developed automatic, habitual cognitive processes that do not serve us well. This means that most of us have to engage in a process of intentional change. At the end of this chapter and in appendix B we have included some reflections and practices that will help you develop mindfulness intentionally. Let us go back to Patrick Cescau of Unilever and look at how this very successful leader cultivates mindfulness as a way of life.

Reflection

When he talked to us about how he maintains mindfulness in everyday work situations, Patrick Cescau told us that finding a corner of peace and quiet in the mind, a place of stillness, is absolutely essential for leaders. That means finding some way to systematically reflect, whether through meditation, spiritual practice, walking in natural, beautiful surroundings, or writing one's personal thoughts and feelings in a journal.

Why is reflection so important? It takes a lot of self-control to manage the inevitable stress and power dynamics inherent in leadership. If you do not have time for yourself, to reflect, to find peace, you will become lost. And if you do not have time for yourself, you will not be good for anyone else. Reflection is one way to build a path to renewal into your life. This includes finding opportunities to stay calm and centered. When you are resonant within yourself, you can create resonance with others. It is not possible to become mindful if we do allow our mind, body, heart, and spirit to speak to us, and it is very hard to hear those quiet voices in the noisy, busy world we live in.

Patrick also recognizes that the pressures—and the loneliness—of leadership can make it very difficult to remain open and mindful, attending holistically to one's self and others. That is why over the years he has deliberately incorporated practices into his life that help him cultivate mindfulness. He is one of those people who loves to learn—which helps when it comes to mindfulness. He reads often and widely—fiction, poetry, autobiography, anything—and he finds like-minded souls with whom to discuss new ideas. He finds time to engage in activities that bring him peace, often very simple things like an evening at home with his family, a joke and a good laugh with friends, and quiet moments alone.

Another tool that Patrick uses is to take time during his day to stop and take himself to a soothing mental space—a place in the mind where he finds serenity and reflection. For Patrick, a place that actually brings him a sense of peace and well being is the desert. He

often refers to the wisdom of favorite old Arabic sayings, “Allah created the desert as his garden, from which he removed all life so that he could take walks in peace and quietness.” And as the caravan drivers tell it, “Allah has removed from the Sahara all that is unnecessary so human beings grasp the essence of things.”²⁰

Patrick actually goes to the desert whenever he can—a place for renewal and rejuvenation. But of course, like most of us, he can not pick up and go away at will, and we need to find other ways to reconnect with the peace we feel in special settings. This has led him to learn how to calm his mind through imagery.

During reflective times he will simply take half an hour, close his eyes, and imagine he is in those special places in the world that he loves. He will see the desert in his mind, feel the wind, smell the rich scent of hot earth. Using this kind of mental imagery can be a powerful tool indeed. In fact, research has shown how simply imagining a peaceful scene can actually change our physiology, calming us down.²¹

How else can reflection help us become more mindful? Rather than simply using it to look inward, at the self, Patrick often practices reflecting about the people around him and with whom he works. He describes the process this way: “I watch people very carefully. Then, I ‘speak to myself’ about what I see. Am I interpreting correctly? Are my own ideas getting in the way? Am I seeing the whole picture?”

This played out in an interesting way a few years ago. One year, as a leader of one of Unilever’s businesses, Patrick realized that he and his team could not raise salaries for everyone, as they had done in the past. They worked out a system of meritocracy, based on a performance appraisal that they believed would allow them to fairly determine how they could selectively raise salaries. Patrick was very proud of the solution and the system.

Of course, Patrick knew his team would be challenged by the system, but he was ready for that. He believed that the system was so fair, it would be easy to defend. Inevitably, a man who was not getting a raise came to him. Patrick was ready, and they went

through his performance appraisal together. The outcome was of course the same, and Patrick asked the man if he thought the results were different. He did not disagree; in fact he agreed with the evaluation. Then, however, the man said something Patrick never expected: “But you have missed something in this system. I have given everything to this company, I have done the very best that I could. I have worked as hard as I could, been as committed as I could, and done absolutely everything I could. I have been loyal, dedicated, and true, and used all my talents and I have inspired the people around me to better performance. I have given my *heart*.”

Patrick realized that in fact, the man was right, and he told him so. He said, “You have a point. In fact, our system might not measure everything that is important. But you see, if I change this decision for you, we will lose face (an important issue in that culture). But I tell you this—if, at the end of next year, you can tell me that you have given everything you could, and been committed, and can show me how this has impacted results, you will get a raise. In the meantime we, as a team, will examine our system and consider how best to measure these more subtle aspects of performance that you so rightly point out.”

What Patrick did in this instance was to use a situation to *develop* mindfulness, not only practice it. Patrick used his experiences as a way to push the boundaries of his own thinking. After the incident, he reviewed the underlying assumptions—both his own and others’—that drove the specifics of the performance system. In doing so, he noticed that certain things were missing, like how to measure commitment and loyalty and how these impacted the overall climate and team results. He and his team were able to make adjustments and change their system over time.

We cannot leave this discussion without saying something about how authentic relationships can also provoke mindfulness. Authentic connection to our loved ones and friends provides us with two things critical in developing mindfulness: safety and an accurate reflection of how others see us and we see them. We can

learn a tremendous amount from the image that others reflect. In our most intimate relationships—with wives, husbands, partners, children, and dear friends—we learn about who we are, about how on track we are in living our professed values. And we can see what we are not, and learn from this, too. This brings us to how we can use our relationships as a way of attaining mindfulness.

Supportive Relationships

Reflection, contemplation, meditation, cognitive training: however you choose to explore your inner world, these things are all critical to developing mindfulness. But even they are not enough. In addition to attending to yourself, you need to pay attention to the other side of the equation, and learn how to attend consciously to other people and the world around you. This is very difficult (if not impossible) to do by yourself. How can you be sure if you are reading other people right if you never check it out with them, or with others? How will you know if you have considered all possibilities regarding a specific situation if you do not engage in dialogue with others? How will you even know if your view of yourself is accurate?

Learning mindfulness includes attending to how and what other people think, feel, and do. This gives you information about the world around you, certainly, but it also gives you information about yourself. It is a lesson that Josie Harper, director of athletics and recreation at Dartmouth College, learned a few years ago when she found herself in the difficult situation of having to shut down one of her athletic programs. It was a last resort, and naturally not a popular decision. But Josie knew that absorbing another budget cut and having every program suffer, across the board, was not the direction she was willing to take. Past budget cuts had caused many of the programs to be lean and at risk of slipping backwards. As difficult as the decision was, and after much consideration, she decided to recommend dropping one sport—men's and women's swimming and diving. She realized

this would be viewed as a risk and perceived as a radical step—one that would be very unpopular with constituents. Certainly the people that concerned Josie the most were the student athletes.

And, not surprisingly, student athletes, parents, and alumni alike were unhappy with her. She was barraged her with phone calls, e-mails, and even tearful pleas in the hallways and at meetings. Amid all of the tumult, in a situation in which many people would be tempted to put up a wall around themselves, or at least a “Do Not Disturb” sign on their doors, Josie stayed close and attentive; she stayed in relationship with people. Even during those weeks when people actually hated what she was doing—and maybe hated her—she continued to reach out, to connect, to talk. She made sure she had all her facts straight and, as importantly, that she truly understood the emotions and opinions of the people affected by her decision. She met as many people as possible—personally and without time limits. She listened, she talked, she stayed centered, grounded, and connected even during the most difficult conversations. With help from others in administration, her approach worked: in the end, students, parents, and alumni pulled together in a phenomenal way, and the program was actually saved.

Josie tells us that these “fifty days from hell” were one of the greatest learning experiences of her life. “Other people’s observations, their comments to me during a difficult time, have been a source of my discovering who I am to them, what they see in me. They have given me a sound sense of the impact I have on people.”²² Beyond the learning, Josie came out of this situation with *better* relationships, even though what she had to do was terribly hard on everyone.

You do not get that kind of outcome unless you are in *contact* with people—unless you are open, available, and willing to engage in the give and take of relationship. Paul McDermott, assistant regional administrator of the U.S. government’s General Services Administration, has put that kind of real contact into practice in his organization, as a way to continually develop

mindfulness and to strengthen the “glue” that holds people together.²³ He starts with the premise that emotionally intelligent behavior is a baseline for healthy relationships at work. He acts on this personally and holds team members accountable for doing the same. More than that, however, he carefully defines his relationship with people. Work in many governments is difficult because of the long-standing network among civil servants, many of whom have been in the division for years and years. Long-standing alliances, old slights, and the everlasting competition for resources are antithetical to transparency and trust, both foundations for healthy relationships. Paul has taken the stance that he needs to continually challenge himself to develop mindfulness—to read people constantly, and to recognize what they are trying to tell him.

For Paul and the team, the focus on *how* they work together pays off. Their results are consistently good, and they are known as one of the least bureaucratic, most effective organizations within the government. In fact, as Paul puts it, “During a period of intense challenges, mindfulness, compassion, and resiliency have allowed us to excel in the face of adversity. Mindfulness and emotional intelligence have created an environment where you can truly come to work and do something great, and be with caring friends while you achieve excellence.” These are powerful statements—backed up by powerful results. During this period, well known and valid measures of customer satisfaction and employee engagement are up. And, no coincidence, we believe, revenue is up dramatically as well.²⁴

As advisers for many years to leaders of some of the most powerful organizations in the world, we have become convinced that being awake, aware, and attentive to self, others, and the environment is a key to effective leadership (not to mention a much more fulfilling life). It is definitely worth spending time and energy developing the capacity to live mindfully. We personally have engaged in mindful practices over the years and know from our own experiences and from working with great leaders that in fact being

more aware, moment to moment, of all that we experience enables us to live more fully—and, yes, be more successful in the work that we do.

A caution, however: We have also learned that some people actually turn mindfulness into the end goal. And the peculiar trap of turning ourselves into a project is one of which we all must beware. Nothing is as annoying as people who continually recount their personal journey, telling anyone who will listen what they do to develop themselves, how hard it is, how rewarding, etc. Leaders who navigate around that trap, we have seen, do so by simply holding onto a noble goal that is beyond themselves, their needs, or their wants—so that mindfulness does not turn into self-centeredness.

Once a person is mindful, what does he or she do with this insight and attentiveness? We believe the great leaders turn to hope and to compassion, as we will explore in the following chapters.

Look, Listen, and Ask

This series of activities will enable you to practice mindfulness. The first exercise focuses on you, and your attunement to yourself. The second and third activities are focused on your ability to tune in to other people, to understand them and to accurately interpret what they are feeling and why they behave in certain ways. Try this series of skill-building tasks for a week or two, as well as those in appendix B, and see what happens in the way you relate to yourself and others.

Exercise 1: Name That Feeling

THREE TIMES a day for a week, stop what you are doing, close your eyes and concentrate on how you are feeling. Put a word to the feeling or feelings you are experiencing. Do not analyze,

just name. At first, this might take as long as five minutes, and you might notice that the words you choose to name your feelings are simple, not nuanced. For example, you may describe your feelings with words like “stressed” or “pressured” or “happy.” As you practice, however, you will find that you are able to name your feelings much more quickly and with more accuracy. For example, “stressed” becomes “frustrated and a little bit anxious”; “happy” becomes “happy and proud of myself” or “grateful to my team.”

Exercise 2: Watch, Look, and Listen

IN THIS EXERCISE, you will attempt to surface your own almost unconscious “sense making” about others’ thoughts and feelings. This is difficult and will take discipline, as most of us make sense of people and situations automatically and somewhat unconsciously.

First, select two or three people with whom you meet face-to-face regularly, and spend twenty minutes or so writing some notes about what you think their typical reactions to you are. Remember their words, their actions, their facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. Do not analyze—just name the emotional reactions you think you get from them and what you guess they think. You might want to simplify this by thinking specifically about an incident or two when you were engaged in something together.

Then, for a week or so, discipline yourself to watch these individuals very carefully when you are together. Try not to be obvious; you might scare them. Look at their eyes, their faces. Note their posture, hand movements, and overall body motion when you are together. In this state of heightened awareness, pay attention to the “invisible clues” they give to what they are thinking and feeling.

Finally, at least once or twice a day, for each of the people you are studying, take five minutes to write notes for yourself about what you have seen. At first, you might simply write observations—what they did, what you saw. Later on, as you get better at

observing subtle clues, attempt to name the emotions you believe you have seen. Try not to over interpret what you have seen, and be careful not to confuse your emotions with theirs.

Exercise 3: Check It Out

AFTER A WEEK or so of observing and attempting to understand people's emotions and related thoughts, you can begin to test your assumptions. Depending on your relationship with the person/people you have been studying you may either be quite open, fully describing what you are doing and why (for your own learning and to improve your relationship with them). Or, if this is a bit too direct, simply begin to naturally introduce statements and questions into conversation that focus on what the other person is actually feeling. Do not name it for them—this causes defensiveness. Rather, try combining simple observations with naming your own feelings and light interpretation, such as, "I noticed just now that we've lost eye contact with each other, and I'm a bit uncomfortable. Seems like you might be too. What happened?" Or, "This conversation is great! You seem as excited as I am about what we are planning." Alternatively, you can, in your search for understanding and developing your ability to interpret others' reactions, simply ask a question: "How do you feel right now about that?" Check their answers with your interpretation.

If you want to take this learning process to the next level, start carefully watching what is happening among people in groups. Notice the interaction and play of emotions between people, not just what happens to an individual at a given moment. Notice how the mood of a group is distinct from the moods of the individuals involved. The art of reading group behavior is extremely sophisticated; mastering it will enable you to be incredibly effective in managing people's energy toward a vision or goal.

N O T E S

Chapter Six

1. Much of the information about John Studzinski comes from author interviews, personal conversations, and correspondence with him during 2004–2005.

2. John Studzinski was made a knight of the order of St. Gregory by Pope John Paul II in 2001 for his humanitarian work with the homeless. More recently, he was made Commander of Saint Sylvester by the Vatican for his work in promoting ecumenism in Kosovo. In 2000, he received the Prince of Wales Ambassador Award in recognition of his work with the homeless.

3. Mindfulness and cognitive psychology: See Ellen J. Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning* (Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1997); Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1989).

4. Mindfulness, Buddhist philosophy, and health: Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1990). Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues have combined Buddhist traditions, modern psychology, and medicine in creating methodologies for people to deal with stress, illness, and the trials of everyday life. At the Stress Reduction Program at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare and Society at the University of Massachusetts, people are trained to use mindful practices such as meditation, breathing techniques, and yoga to discover inner strengths and coping mechanisms in order to deal more effectively with their particular situations. Also see Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994); and Saki Santorelli, *Heal Thy Self* (New York: Random House, 1999); Richard Davidson, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jessica Schumacher, Melissa Rosenkranz, Daniel Muller, Saki F. Santorelli, Ferris Urbanowski, Anne Harrington, Katherine Bonus, and John F. Sheridan, “Alterations in brain and immune

function produced by mindfulness meditation,” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 65 (2003): 564–570.

5. The medicine wheel: Using the medicine wheel as an organizing framework for leadership development is discussed in Clint Sidle, *Five Archetypes of Leadership* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, in press). For more on this, see Angeles Arrien, *The Fourfold Way: Walking the Paths of the Warrior, Teacher, Healer and Visionary* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993). Arrien’s work bridges anthropology, psychology, religion, and organizational dynamics to provide us with unique insights about human development and relationships.

6. Mindful living: See Tara Bennett-Goleman, *Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart* (New York: Harmony Books, 2001); and Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*.

7. Self-awareness: The ability to monitor one’s thoughts, feelings, and responses enables us to engage more effectively with others. See Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

8. Much of the information about Judi Johansen in this chapter is taken from author interviews and correspondence, 2004.

9. Recognizing emotional clues and cues: See Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* (New York: Times Books, 2003).

10. Emotional reality: We first used this term in *Primal Leadership*. The term refers to the subtle emotional undercurrent that is present in any human group. The emotional reality informs a group’s culture and climate, and individuals’ behavior. For more on this see Annie McKee and Fran Johnston, “The Impact and Opportunity of Emotion in Organizational Development” in *The NTL Handbook of Organizational Development and Change* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons/Pfeiffer, 2005).

11. Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning*.

12. Thoughts, feelings, and cognitive categories: Our mental categories are actually a very complex system of emotional reactions, memories, and thought patterns. They are extremely useful to us as we take in information. As we take it in, we filter it through our existing cognitive categories. We either assimilate the information, (e.g., fit it into our existing categories) or we accommodate to it (e.g., change our cognitive categories to fit the new information). This is an elegant system and yet sometimes, there can be problems: our system of categorization is not always accurate and assimilation is often

easier than accommodation. For more information on this see Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning*; Langer, *Mindfulness*.

13. Mindfulness and cognitive psychology: Ellen Langer's work has been instrumental in helping us understand how we human beings make sense of our world and our place in it. See Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning*; Langer, *Mindfulness*; and Ellen J. Langer and Lois Imber, "When Practice Makes Imperfect: The Debilitating Effects of Overlearning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (1979): 2014–2025.

14. Brain functioning and emotions: Emotions, as well as thoughts, guide how we categorize information and make sense of what is happening to us and in our environment. In addition to the Langer reference in note 12, see Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995); Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1998); and Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership*.

15. Much of the information about Patrick Cescau is from author interviews, conversations, and correspondence during 2004–2005.

16. Shoulds and oughts: See Charles Handy, *The Hungry Spirit: Beyond Capitalism: A Quest for Purpose in the Modern World* (London: Hutchinson, 1997).

17. Noble purpose, noble goals: We have been inspired by our colleagues at SixSeconds, a not-for-profit organization that brings researchers and practitioners together to put the science of emotional intelligence into practice. Josh Freedman and Anabel Jensen use the term "noble goal" to describe that underlying, most important purpose in our lives. See also Clair Nuer, "Shifting to the Ecosystem," *EQ Today*, 2000, <http://www.eqtoday.com/archive/ecosystem.html>.

18. Optimal self-esteem: Michael H. Kernis, in his article "Toward a Conceptualization of Optimal Self Esteem" (*Psychological Inquiry* 14, no. 1 (2003): 1–26), reviews the literature on self-esteem and makes the argument that the construct is more complex than originally thought. He states that until recently, low self-esteem has been linked with negative feelings of self-worth, high self-esteem with positive ones. Recent research indicates that people with low self-esteem may in fact have some positive self-regard, and less negative perceptions about themselves than previously believed. Such people are, however, characterized by inconsistency in their views of themselves and a lack of stability in their self-concepts. More pertinent to our work with leaders, who generally seem to have a good deal of positive self-regard, Kernis and colleagues (1993) argue that there are at least two "types" of high self-esteem that until recently have often been considered to be the

same. People with “fragile” high self-esteem often operate from a sense of vulnerability and act to protect their self-image; they defend their self-image, often through a process of constantly comparing themselves with others to be sure they are still “better.” These individuals may be very proud of their achievements, while attributing their failures to the environment. They often expend much time and energy (psychological and otherwise) to maintain and even enhance their positive perceptions of themselves and overall self-concept. Individuals with “secure” high self-esteem, on the other hand, are characterized by a positive, but balanced and realistic, set of perceptions about themselves. They accept themselves—both strengths and weaknesses—and do not need to feel superior to others in order to maintain their sense of positive self-regard. In our work with leaders, we notice that those individuals who, over a period of many years, do not get accurate feedback on themselves—and in fact are only given information that bolsters their self-esteem—often end up with fairly “fragile” self esteem. At some level, they may know that they are not being given the full picture, and yet it is the only one they have. This self-image can become increasingly important over the years, leading to unrealistically positive feelings of self-worth and defensive postures to protect the image; see Michael H. Kernis, David P. Cornell, Chienru Sun, Andrea Berry, and Thomas Harlow, “There’s More to Self-esteem than Whether It’s High or Low: The Importance of Stability of Self-esteem,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (1993): 1190–1204.

19. Imposter syndrome: See Steven Berglas, *The Success Syndrome: Hitting Bottom When You Reach the Top* (New York: Plenum, 1986); Pauline Clance, *The Imposter Phenomenon: Overcoming the Fear That Haunts Your Success* (New York: Peachtree Publishing, 1985); Kathy Oriel, Mary Beth Plane, and Marlon Mundt, “Family Medicine Residents and the Imposter Phenomenon,” *Family Medicine* 36, no. 4 (2004); Peggy McIntosh, *Feeling Like a Fraud* (Wellesley, MA: Stone Center, 1985).

20. Old Arabic sayings: See *Sahara, Land Beyond Imagination*, photography by Frans Lemmens, text by Martijn de Rooi (Dutch Publishers, 2004), 29.

21. Mental imagery and physiology: Liz Roffe, Katja Schmidt, and Edzard Ernst, “A Systematic Review of Guided Imagery as an Adjuvant Cancer Therapy,” *Psycho-oncology* (January 2005) DOI: 10.1002/pon.889; Lisa Manniz, Rohit Chadukar, Lisa Rybicki, Diane Tusek, and Olen Solomon, “The Effect of Guided Imagery on Quality of Life for Patients with Chronic Tension-type Headaches,” *Headache: Journal of Head and Face Pain* 39 (1999): 326–324.

22. Josie Harper: Much of the information about Josie Harper was gathered through author interviews, personal conversations, and correspondence during 2004–2005.

23. Much of the information about Paul McDermott was gathered through author interviews, personal conversations, and correspondence during 2004–2005.

24. Mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and results: While Paul McDermott did not engage in a formal research study, it is worth noting that during the period that he and his team dedicated themselves to enhancing their leadership capabilities—specifically emotional intelligence—and while they focused on developing healthy, mindful relationships, common and well-known measures of customer and employee satisfaction, as well as measures of EI and revenue, rose considerably: The J.D. Power customer satisfaction rating rose to 8.6 on a 10-point scale, the Gallup Q12 employee engagement score ranked in the top 1 percent of government and industry, their EQ assessment score improved by 51 percent while revenue rose 53 percent.