

Mindful Leadership: Training the Brain to Lead

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Some people seem to be born happy. Some seem born to be great leaders. How much of this is down to how the brain is wired – and how much of it can be changed?

Since the early 1990s, neuroscientists have broadly accepted that people who show more activity in the left prefrontal cortex of their brains tend to feel that they have their lives under control. They experience a sense of personal growth, meaning and purpose. They have good personal relationships and accept themselves for who they are. They take what may be broadly characterised as an “approach” orientation to life. Such happy people tend to be good leaders.

Those whose right prefrontal cortex is more activated, on the other hand, are by contrast more discontent and unhappier. They often feel that their lives are out of control and they are disappointed with how things have turned out for them. They tend to be dissatisfied with their personal relationships and with their work and they rarely feel emotional highs. People at this end of the emotional spectrum are more “avoidance” oriented. They tend to be less effective leaders.

Taking readings across a general population group, you get a bell curve distribution, with most people in the middle, experiencing a mixture of approach and avoidance attitudes, having a mix of good and bad moods, left and right prefrontal cortex activation. Those relatively few people who are farthest to the right will be most likely to experience a clinical depression or anxiety disorder over the course of their lives. While those lucky few farthest to the left rarely experience troubling moods and recover from them very quickly.

For many years neuroscientists attributed this distribution of happiness and its associated qualities across populations to what they called each individual’s “affective style” – their emotional disposition. Crudely put, the thinking went that whether your outlook on life was sunny or bleak was pretty much stable. You could get highs or lows depending on changing circumstances but, like a rubber band snapping back into position, you will tend to return to your happiness “set point” depending on your basic affective style.

In 2001 all of this thinking began to change. Professor Richard Davidson, who since 1984 had pioneered the study of brain asymmetry, came to study the brain activity of highly experienced meditators. To his enormous surprise and interest, his first subject showed a left prefrontal cortex activation that simply

went off the charts. Studies with other highly experienced meditators confirmed these findings. Could mental training, Davidson wondered, shift the happiness “set point”? And, if so, was it really a “set point” after all?

But it is one thing to investigate the brains of really skilled meditators, quite another to see if those changes can be replicated in an ordinary population group.

A tentative answer to that last question has come from a study that Davidson did in collaboration with Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn teaches mindfulness meditation skills to patients with chronic diseases of all kinds, to help them better handle their symptoms. In an article published in *Psychosomatic Medicine* in 2003, Davidson and Kabat-Zinn report the effects of training in mindfulness meditation to workers in Promega – a high-pressure biotech business in Madison, Wisconsin.

One group undertook an eight week course in mindfulness training. A comparison group of volunteers from the company received the training later, and, like the first course participants, were tested before and after training by Davidson and his colleagues.

Mindfulness training involves learning to pay attention: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally to whatever arises in the field of your experience. Derived from the Buddhist meditative traditions, the mindfulness approach to leadership, personal effectiveness, emotional intelligence and stress reduction is finding its way increasingly into secular contexts.

Before the course, the whole Promega group – as with many who work in high pressure environments – was tipped on average toward the right in the ratio for the emotional set point and complained of feeling highly stressed. The group who received the mindfulness training, however, reported afterwards that their moods had improved. They felt more engaged in their work, energized and less anxious. This was born out by their brain scan results. Their emotions ratio shifted significantly leftward. What is more, these results persisted at the three month follow-up. It seems that their set point had changed.

Mindfulness also improved the robustness of their immune systems, as gauged by the amount of flu antibodies in their blood after receiving a flu shot. Other studies seem to suggest that if people in two experimental groups are exposed to the flu virus, those who have learned mindfulness will experience less severe symptoms. The greater the leftward shift in the emotional set point, the larger the increase in the immune measure.

Davidson's results suggest that, given the proper training, the emotional set point can shift. Mindfulness training can help you to become happier – and it can make you a better leader.

It's hard to define the essence of good leadership, but if you've ever worked under one you'll know how satisfying that can be. Good leaders make work enjoyable, however demanding it is. They inspire their teams to give of their best, skilfully drawing on the talents and temperaments of their subordinates. You could describe what they do as the creation of resonance because they draw out and amplify the qualities of those around them. People who do this tend to be highly "approach" oriented. Dissonant leaders, by contrast, drain the enthusiasm of teams and organizations. They lower morale and make those around them unhappy. They tend to be very "avoidance" oriented.

Richard Boyatzis, professor of organizational behaviour at the Weatherhead School of Management, specialises in the study of leadership. Good leaders, he says, attain resonance with those around them through self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. All of these being, to some extent or other, mindfulness skills.

But the demands of leadership produce "power stress", a side-effect of being in a position of power and influence that often leaves even the best leaders physically and emotionally drained. As a result leaders can easily find themselves moving from an "approach" orientation to their task – emotionally open, engaged and innovative – to an "avoidance" orientation that is characterised by aversion, irritability and close-mindedness.

Mindfulness training strengthens the tendency towards the approach mode of mind. This is because it teaches one to take an interest in all aspects of one's experience and to "approach" it, treating it with acceptance and curiosity. A formal training in mindfulness skills provides one with the tools to switch from an avoidant mode of mind into an approach one.

Mindfulness training teaches one to embrace and understand the entirety of each moment. It is not a neutral or blank state however. Real mindfulness is imbued with warmth, care, and interest. It consists of an engaged interest with whatever is before one, and where there is interest a warm, natural, and unforced attention follows.

The pressures that pull managers into dissonance are increasing. This is fed by a number of issues. Time compression, the demands of multitasking and the feeling that the world is increasingly unsafe are huge pulls toward dissonant experiences.

To be effective with other people, you need to intentionally work towards resonant relationships. Training in mindfulness, one discovers tools for self-renewal that lead to greater life-satisfaction and significantly higher levels of effectiveness at work.

Further Reading

Boyatzis, R & McKee, A., Resonant Leadership. Harvard Business School Press, 2005.

Begley, S., Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain. Ballantine Books, 2007.

Davidson, R., Kabat-Zinn, J et al., “Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation”, in Psychosomatic Medicine vol. 65 pp.564–570, 2003

Michael Chaskalson has a Masters’ degree in mindfulness-based clinical interventions. He is an honorary research fellow at the University of Wales Bangor where he teaches an MA module on Buddhist psychology.

A Buddhist practitioner for over thirty years, his experience of the world of business began in 1980 when he founded Windhorse Trading, a ‘fair-trade’ trading company that today has a turnover in the region of £9 million and donates its profits to charity.

After leaving the company, Michael founded the Cambridge Buddhist Centre, teaching Buddhism and meditation at centres throughout the UK, Ireland and the rest of the world. Under the name Kulananda, he has and published six books on Buddhism and meditation, most recently “Mindfulness and Money”, co-authored with Dominic Houlder, a professor at the London Business School.

Michael runs mindfulness programmes for a variety of clients, including several large professional service firms and works as a personal coach at senior executive level.