

Finding the space to Lead

Mindfulness helps leaders see, hear, and think with greater clarity, according to Janice Marturano, who teaches mindfulness to leaders in corporate settings.



“It really worked!” announced one of the corporate leaders as she arrived early for a mindful leadership practice session. Susan (as we’ll call her) was visibly happy and excited, an unusual response for 4:00 p.m. on a workday. When I asked her what was up, she told me she had just come from a meeting where a major change in corporate direction was announced that would result in months spent reworking something that was well underway. Normally such an event would have made Susan so upset she would need to be, in her own words, “scraped off the ceiling.” But this time, she said, she drew on the mindfulness training she had been practicing over the past several weeks and discovered she had the capacity to respond in a different, more skillful way. First, she recognized the arising of a familiar form of reactivity, and then, in a momentary pause, noticed the possibility of meeting the situation differently.

As I listened to Susan, I was struck by the sense that her joy reflected a much deeper discovery: that a spaciousness and freedom from reactive, auto-pilot leadership can be accessed by cultivating mindfulness. Leaders remember something fundamental about being a human being as they recognize that there is a way to meet each moment of their lives without reactivity, judging, and storytelling. These are not only unnecessary but also cloud their ability to see clearly what is actually there and respond with

greater wisdom. In these times, can leaders afford to do otherwise?

The mindful leadership curricula we have been presenting combine some of the latest neuroscience discoveries with established mental disciplines drawn from the meditative tradition. Mindful leadership training is not about relaxation. It offers the intensive mental discipline training of mindfulness meditation in a context that recognizes the unprecedented challenges and opportunities facing leaders today. It invites leaders to explore for themselves the possibility of bringing all of their mind’s capacities to each moment of their lives.

Mindfulness training teaches leaders to rely not just on analytical resources and strengths, but to intentionally cultivate and strengthen the mind’s capacity to be fully present. In so doing, leaders begin to see and hear and think with greater clarity, and perhaps to expand the repertoire of possibilities and responses in their lives.

The journey to develop the mindful leadership curricula began in 2005 during a discussion among colleagues at the University of Massachusetts’ Center for Mindfulness. We were talking about how, despite the increasing spread of mindfulness throughout many aspects of society, a comprehensive methodology to bring mindfulness to organizations seemed notably absent. Although there had been many attempts, none had the sustained impact I sensed might be possible.

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It seemed clear that the way to have the greatest impact on any organization was to bring mindfulness training to its leaders. But offering Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction to leaders was not the solution. The classic MBSR format focuses on stress, and many leaders simply would not invest the time needed to experience and understand the potential of mindfulness training if the benefit were merely stress reduction. Mindful leadership training would need to explore benefits far beyond stress reduction. The journey would not be about bringing mindfulness training to leaders; it would be about cultivating leadership presence. Ideally, the mindful leadership program would bring together the mental training of mindfulness meditation with an understanding—from the inside out—of the challenges, complexities, opportunities, and responsibilities of today’s leaders.

There was no road map to follow in developing this new approach, and it would depend on ongoing dialogue with the participants. A daunting challenge, but thankfully one that I began with an extraordinary partner: Saki Santorelli, executive director of the University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness. Together, we began this journey with a pilot group of thirteen leaders and a newly developed curriculum entitled Cultivating Leadership Presence through Mindfulness.

Four years and more than 350 graduates later, a unique exploration of mindful leadership has emerged. This exploration takes place in a laboratory that can take the form of a multi-day residential retreat or a series of consecutive weekly classes. Each

leader becomes the experimenter and collects his or her own data. Some of the data is familiar; some is newly discovered and holds the promise of more deeply understanding ourselves and bringing our true and complete self to leadership.

Over the last twenty years as a leader in for-profit and non-profit organizations, I have noticed a few common qualities among the most influential leaders: pursuit of excellence, open curiosity, integrity, and respect and caring for others. My experience with mindful leadership further reinforces this observation. Leaders who attend mindful leadership retreats are often taking a leap of faith into an area they know little about, and yet their inquisitive nature encourages them to explore mindfulness just as they would any other new territory. The retreats are intense, yet the leaders are willing to work hard to meet that intensity. In fact, the physical and mental challenge of mindful leadership training aligns with their belief in pursuing excellence. Rather than being a hurdle, it keeps leaders in the game. The training also draws out their integrity and caring for others when they take a pause from the constant busyness that can infect us all and begin to reflect on what really is at the core of their authentic leadership. They notice the potential to lead with greater clarity, with more transparency, and with less storytelling about the future and the past.

When I speak with leaders about attending the retreats, I am frequently asked, “What do you know about the impact of this training on leaders?” To answer this question, we started collecting qualitative responses at the first retreat. This group was made up of leaders from General Mills, where I work, and I knew firsthand that they had access to some of the best leadership training available. I was pleasantly

surprised, then, when the most commonly used word among all of the feedback responses was “transformative.”

To take our research on impacts further, we wondered if there would be value in asking about specific leadership qualities, such as strategic thinking, decision making, listening deeply, increasing productivity, and decreasing reactivity. So in 2009, we undertook two studies. Since leaders were not



A Mindful Calendar

Once leaders understand and practice the basics of formal mindfulness meditation, we invite them to take the training into everyday life through informal practices. Some of the richest explorations of mindfulness come from simply paying attention to the daily calendar.

In this practice, leaders are asked to notice the sensations in their body as they review a single calendar page from their schedules. Almost instantly, when leaders pause long enough, they notice that their chest or stomach has tightened or their neck has tensed up. They begin to become curious about those messages from the body. They begin to question the status quo.

For many of us, a calendar of meeting after meeting seems inevitable. We have to do it!

But is the schedule that’s been laid down for us—often by a variety of other people—carved in stone? Do we believe that if someone thinks we are needed in a meeting, we can’t turn it down? After all, we are leaders, so we must be needed, right?

With a pause that opens us to the present—that allows us to notice how the body is meeting the beginning of the day—we can become more reflective

about our choices. What is the best use of our time? How many meetings do we attend even when others on our team are in attendance? Do we attend because we work in a culture where *everyone needs to know everything*? Do we live in an environment that is so competitive that there is a sense that constant visibility is necessary to ensure advancement? How many meetings are a complete waste of time? In a global economy with increasingly scarce resources, is this how leaders should be meeting the day?

Calendar practice also raises questions about cultivating space for the teams we lead to grow, about the barriers to innovation that arise from a simple lack of space in the day, and about the allure of reacting to situations simply to get something off the to-do list. These and many other discoveries all begin with the simple act of intentionally pausing to practice mindfulness for a few moments. In that small opening, the possibility emerges of meeting the day with more openness and flexibility in our chest, stomach, and neck, and a corresponding spaciousness of mind that allows us to lead ourselves and others more effectively through the chaos and complexity of our day. — JANICE MARTURANO

How Leaders Responded to Mindfulness Training

Cultivating Leadership Presence through Mindfulness

A 4½-day retreat, 80 respondents

• Please rate how much change, if any, has occurred for you in the following attitudes and behaviors as a result of your participation in mindfulness (retreat and practice).

Percent reporting positive change:

- 93% Taking time to reflect...space for discovery/innovation
- 89% Enhanced listening...to self and others
- 88% Exhibiting patience...with self and others
- 80% Making better decisions...clarity

Mindful Leadership@Work

A 7-week course, 40+ respondents

- I am able to be fully attentive to a conversation.
Pre-course: 26%, Post-course: 77%
- I am able to make time on most days to prioritize my work.
Pre-course: 17%, Post-course: 54%
- I am able to notice when my attention has been pulled away and redirect it to the present.
Pre-course: 23%, Post-course: 67%

Cultivating Leadership Presence through Mindfulness and Mindful Leadership@Work are © 2010 Janice L. Marturano.

so interested in whether the training would help them handle stress, we didn't do typical mindfulness research, which measures biological and psychological indicators of stress. What we wanted to know was whether the training would affect how well they would lead, and to our delight the answers were consistently strong, as the sample data in the box shows.

We also did a pre- and post-course survey of mid-level managers who participated in a seven-week, two-hour-per-week, Mindful Leadership@Work course. All 19 categories we looked at showed statistically significant positive change. In addition, we've noticed interest in the program going viral: colleagues of leaders who have participated in the programs routinely tell others about the changes they have noticed in the leaders who have taken part, and of course the leaders themselves speak about their experiences.

One of our key assumptions in this work has been that if leaders embody mindful leadership, the impact on their organizations would be significant whether or not their teams were trained in mindfulness. If, for example, they use the calendar exercise on the preceding page, what kind of ripple effect does that have? What if the leader begins to question the volume of meetings, perhaps delegating more, or being more intentional about leaving space in the day for connecting with colleagues and direct reports? What is the impact on the organization and the community if a leader routinely has enough space in their day to ask if there are better ways to do things—ones that are more productive, more profitable, more compassionate, more socially responsible?

The work that began with the four-and-half-day Cultivating Leadership Presence through Mindfulness retreat has unfolded to include many other offerings under the mindful leadership umbrella, including a seven-week course for all levels of an organization, an annual Mindful Leaders Alumni Retreat, a Mindfulness Meditations for Leaders CD and a wide variety of weekly, bi-monthly, and internet meditation practice supports.

All of these emerged in response to leaders asking for something more to support their exploration. Leaders lead, so once they were touched by mindful leadership, they had plenty of ideas about where else mindfulness might be brought into their organizations. So, the mindful leadership work has spread quickly to leaders from more than 30 organizations, because leaders tell other leaders about their experiences—particularly when they help them find better ways to lead in the face of change and uncertainty. 