

Mindful Leadership

The secret to increased productivity and creativity.

BY LINDA ALLEN, ACS, CL

With a wealth of information, training and materials competing for our attention, how do you know where to start when you want to improve your leadership skills? How do you become better at inspiring, motivating, engaging and energizing others?

Businesses, governments, universities, civic groups and individuals are finding that truly great leadership comes from people who can lead themselves first. The idea is that by learning to lead yourself, you will become a more sensitive and effective leader. You are off to a great start by being active in your club, and if you choose to pursue the leadership track you'll gain additional insight.

Although you may not consider yourself a leader outside of Toastmasters, each of us influences others in our interactions as role models, mentors, colleagues, family members and friends. Even strangers observe how you act and react, and they make decisions based on what they see. The power and impact of your influence is greater than you realize.

“Good leadership is knowing where to lead people,” wrote Dr. Stephen McKenzie, psychologist and author of *Mindfulness at Work*. “The essence of knowing where to lead *other* people is knowing where to lead *ourselves*. We have to discover *our* full working potential before we can lead others to discovering *their* full working potential.”

Up-Close and Personal

The first step in leading yourself is to know who you are—your values, character and essence. A list of respected voices from all cultures and times, including Socrates, Lao Tzu, Buddha, Shakespeare, Ralph Waldo Emerson and more, have expressed some version of “Know thyself” to guide future generations in their quest for purpose and meaning in their lives.

To truly know yourself, you have to get up-close and personal by spending quiet time alone to ask and answer the question “Who am I?” We often avoid that puzzling question because we consider who we are not—instead of who we can be. The opinions of others, whether positive or negative, also influence who we believe we are. Each person’s answer will be unique—there is no right or wrong answer.

“Most people define themselves through the content of their lives—experiences, thoughts, career, material objects and relationships. Knowing yourself is being yourself and ceasing to





PERSONAL GROWTH



identify with content,” says Eckhart Tolle, author of the bestselling books, *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth*.

But, finding the time and space to ask and answer deep questions of identity can be challenging when you are overwhelmed by an overscheduled life. Wise voices from the past give us another piece of advice: Be still.

An Old Practice

In today’s world of multitasking and information overload, our minds often run on autopilot just to keep up with the demands and responsibilities of work and our personal lives. How can you find a place of stillness and inner peace when the noise of the world around you interrupts your day and intrudes on your thoughts and concentration?

Mindfulness is the space of stillness and peace where you can quiet your thoughts and relax your mind in the present moment.

Stress is an indicator of not being mindful.

It’s an old practice that is attracting new attention as a way to slow down the mind and redirect your wandering attention. Mindfulness is the opposite of multitasking, working and living on autopilot. It teaches you to control your mind and your thoughts through stillness. For centuries, the staying power and value of mindfulness have proven true.

Emotional Fitness

If you think you’re seeing words like mindfulness, purposeful, intentional, self-awareness and engagement more frequently, you’re right. They’ve crept into mainstream awareness and even into business vocabulary, which has traditionally scoffed at leadership qualities that deal with emotions. Mindfulness workshops at international economic conferences have attracted standing-room-only crowds.

A mindfulness course at Google called “Search Inside Yourself” is the company’s most popular training program. Approximately 2,000 employees have participated in it. Chade-Meng Tan, who has the unconventional title of Jolly Good Fellow, led the creation of the course. He encourages emotional fitness in Google employees by helping them create peace, joy and kindness in their lives. When you lead your life with these three attributes, you can lead others to have the same experience. Without that foundation, it’s hard to do the right thing, says Tan.

Like other companies, Google has discovered the positive effect that mindfulness has on the company’s profit and success. People begin to help others for the greater good. Tan believes



Google’s leadership in communication technology will spur the development of software and apps that will put mindfulness into the hands of digital users.

Janice L. Marturano, founder and executive director of the Institute for Mindful Leadership and author of *Finding the Space to Lead*, practices mindful leadership as a simple and effective way to lead and live better. While a top executive at General Mills, she juggled career, civic and personal responsibilities by reacting to the loudest voice in her overscheduled life.

Marturano discovered mindfulness when family and corporate decisions challenged her usual pattern of problem-solving. She found mindfulness meditation, and within a few weeks noticed how her reactions had changed to responses, and her ability to let go of conditioned behaviors, trivial worries and mental clutter expanded. She became a “closet meditator,” reluctant to share her unconventional problem-solving method with her colleagues.

As she practiced mindfulness meditation, her days became more productive and creative, which spilled over into her personal life. People began to notice the change in her and wanted to learn her “secret.” During her last five years at General Mills, she developed and taught the company’s Mindful Leadership training, which is now part of the work experience for all interested employees. In 2010, she left the company to found the Institute for Mindful Leadership in Oakland, New Jersey, and has taught mindful leadership at organizations around the world, including World Economic Forum gatherings in Davos, Switzerland and Tianjin, China.

A Complementary Pair

In a phone interview with Marturano, she spoke with thoughtful consideration of her words. She told how she realized that mindfulness and leadership training are compatible—they complement each other and are intertwined.

To tap into mindfulness, Marturano recommends 10 minutes of daily meditation twice a day to redirect your focus in the midst of countless distractions. That’s where being still comes in—being still enough to notice your breath. She says:

“Mindfulness creates space around your thoughts. From that space come responsive, conscious choices. You are not just focused on the short-term outcomes, you have a chance to ask ‘What is the best choice now?’ You strengthen and cultivate your mind to be present and to bring your full and best capacity to the choices you make.”

In an online interview with Elliot Hayes, manager of About Time Management Solutions, an Australian consulting company, psychologist McKenzie said mindfulness in the workplace improves decision-making skills, which leads to quality results. Mindfulness brings simplicity and natural abilities to decision-making.

Stress is an indicator of not being mindful. Many mistakes are caused by not paying attention to what you are doing, such



as hitting the send button on an email that you should not send. Instead of focusing on what is happening in the moment, your mind is distracted by living in, and anticipating, the future.

To go from mindless work habits to paying mindful attention and focusing on what you are doing, McKenzie suggests focusing on your breath.

McKenzie describes mindful leaders as those who see opportunities to lead themselves and others. They give clear directions and allow for quiet space so that others can identify their own best way to be an effective working part of the whole. Conversations without distractions of technology (or your ego planning its responses to the conversation) make others feel valued, heard and understood.

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— District 16 Governor Jieliang Pan, DTM

From Marturano’s point of view, “It’s ironic that the technology that was created to connect us easier and faster actually disconnects us from quality relationships.” She shared the example of a workshop attendee who returned to work and started the practice of closing his laptop whenever he had a conversation with colleagues. He noticed how different the conversations were when he listened and paid full attention to the other person. His team members commented they felt heard, respected and understood.

Another one of Marturano’s workshop participants, after putting his smartphone away one evening, looked up at the star-filled sky and realized he hadn’t seen the stars in the last 20 years. His true “aha” moment was when he wondered what else he may have missed while staring at his phone.

It Shows

If you are a mindful leader, your responses come from a center of peace. You choose your words thoughtfully and exude calmness and kindness, which makes you feel comfortable. District 16 Governor Jieliang Pan, DTM, brings these qualities to his leadership responsibilities with Oklahoma Toastmasters clubs and members. He describes his own mindfulness as being fully committed to, and following through on, his leadership responsibilities. When you are with Pan, you feel his values of integrity, respect, service and sincerity. He wants all Toastmasters to experience the joy he does in his leadership role.



GOT 20 MINUTES TO BE A BETTER LEADER?

Ten minutes twice a day opens up much-needed mental space—the space today’s leaders say they desperately need, says Janice Marturano. Marturano, author of *Finding the Space to Lead*, says mindful leadership helps us face the incredible challenges of being a leader. A simple 10-minute sitting meditation—on a chair or floor, at home or at the office—is the way to start. Here’s how it works:

- Sit comfortably in a way your body can be still and supported. A straight-backed chair is fine.
- Bring your attention to your breath.
- Be open and curious about whatever you notice, such as thoughts, sensations or sounds. Don’t try to change or control or judge what you notice.
- When your attention pulls or drifts away, redirect your attention back to your breath. “This is not about clearing your mind or finding your bliss,” says Marturano. “The process of redirecting is the practice. You are building your ability to pull yourself back to focus in the midst of countless distraction.

Do this twice a day. Details and audio downloads for this basic mindfulness meditation and other leadership practices are free on her website, FindingTheSpaceToLead.com.

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“Mindfulness is a journey to keep growing. You have to keep learning in order to grow,” Pan says. “Serving, learning and growing are the keys to effective leadership personally, professionally and as a Toastmaster. We have to keep learning from each other to continue to grow.”

Getting to know yourself through mindful meditation gives you insight into yourself as well as an honest perspective of the external world, which improves your leadership skills. Long-lasting and far-reaching effects of mindful leadership ripple beyond your job or leadership position to your personal life and out to the world. As your external life mirrors your internal peace and control, others notice. They sense your sincerity, authenticity and compassion. That’s when mindful leadership becomes a win-win-win for everyone. You’ve inspired them to accompany you on the mindfulness journey to get to know who they are and then to become mindful leaders who will inspire positive changes in the world.

Enjoy your journey! ■

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