

Mindfulness: Spiriting Effective Strategic Leadership and Management

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INTRODUCTION

In a hyper-globalized market, competition is cut-throat (Trisoglio, 2012). Leaders and managers are called upon to be vigilant to threats to their businesses and organizations while, at the same time, searching for opportunities to profit and expand. Leaders and managers are called upon to manage a plethora of stakeholder relationships, initiatives, projects and processes as well as the needs of their followers. This tug-of-war of competing priorities on multiple fronts can be challenging at best, debilitating at worst, as the need to excel on all fronts remains a constant. (Roche, Haar, & Luthans, 2014). In recent years, new markets in developing countries have risen to compete against established markets, catapulting the status quo and customary systems into disarray and, at times, chaos. Technological advances, rapid-fire innovations, and one-the-money cost reductions are viewed as key to being successful in fast-changing global markets. Improving leadership acumen among employees at all levels is no longer a strategy for success to consider; it is vital even in times of intense cost-cutting (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2001). Empirical evidence has shown that embracing and promoting mindfulness as a business practice can fuel effective strategic leadership and management, build morale, create a positive workplace culture, and heighten productivity, creativity and innovation (Reb, Narayanan, & Chaturvedi, 2014). Empirical evidence has shown that mindfulness can recharge individuals and expand their capacity as productive members of the organizations in which they work (Gardiner, 2012).

Defining Mindfulness

The subject and study of mindfulness has been a growing trend in the Western world for decades, though largely unexplored by business enterprises. Mindfulness was originally expounded by Gautama Siddhartha, colloquially known as the Buddha, 2500 years ago in his original teachings of Buddhism (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The widespread introduction of mindfulness to the Western world dates back to the 1960s, when Buddhist teachers started traveling and teaching about meditation and its effects on the mind. Mindfulness is the translation of the word *sati* which means “intentness of mind” or “wakefulness” (Glomb, Duffy, Bono, & Yang 2011). Mindfulness has many definitions and interpretations. It is said to be derived from the Vipassana tradition of Buddhism, which focuses on being in the present moment

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(Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). It is considered by many to be the cultivation of attention to moment-to-moment stimuli and the acceptance of stimuli that arise in thought without control or elaboration (Ling & Chin, 2012). Mindfulness is also seen as a quality of existing that involves being open, receptive, and having a non-judgmental orientation to the present (Roche et al., 2014). This means actively giving attention to the experience within the current moment and not being trapped by what Glomb and others call “the thinking mind.” This can be viewed as suspending judgments and merely experiencing the moment for what it contains (Glomb et al., 2011).

Mindfulness and Psychosomatic Changes

Mindfulness has been studied by psychologists for its benefits of lowering stress among those who practice it. It has also been suggested that leaders who exhibit higher levels of mindfulness are more effective leaders (Reb et al., 2014). Mindfulness has become famous in popular culture by the proliferation of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) created by researchers at the University of Massachusetts (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The MBSR is a program designed to reduce stress and increase pain tolerance and has been successful in separating the metaphysical properties of Buddhist meditation into a secular vehicle (Glomb et al., 2011).

Mindfulness develops an inner resource. Research has shown that mindfulness has many benefits for emotional and mental well-being. It has been proven to reduce general anxiety, depression, social anxiety, and helps people become more resilient to stress (Beekun, 2015). Practicing mindfulness helps individuals retain control over their lives by learning to overcome negative emotions and psychological states (Glomb et al., 2011). The Dalai Lama, a spiritual leader for Tibetan Buddhism, has actively tied Eastern spiritualism with Western empiricism through sponsored research into the benefits of mindfulness (Koch, 2013). In addition to increasing mental well-being, mindfulness has also been correlated with higher overall physical health. It has been shown to reduce pain and distress in individuals (Rosenzweig, Greeson, Reibel, Green, Jasser, & Beasley, 2010), psychological distress (Bränström, Kvillemo, & Moskowitz, 2012), and depression (Crane & Kuyken, 2013). Increases in mindful meditation practice have also been strongly correlated with lower alcohol and substance abuse, increase in overall well-being, sleep quality, and reduced negative affect. It has also been linked to reduced hostility and aggression (Glomb et al., 2011). These correlations between mindfulness and habit and behavior improvements are important for good leadership and healthy individuals (Beekun, 2015).

Mindfulness has been shown to change the physical form of the human brain (Glomb et al., 2011). Brain plasticity is the ability of the brain to reorganize itself and create new connections in response to changes in the environment. Using Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI)—a device used to measure brain activity—long-term meditators have exhibited increased thickness of the middle prefrontal cortex, which is associated with internal awareness and reduced pain sensitivity (Glomb et al., 2011). Activity in the prefrontal cortex increases which is used for higher level decision making. Reduction of amygdala activity in long-term meditators has also been presented in mindfulness studies (Glomb et al., 2011). The amygdala is a portion of the brain that regulates human aggressiveness (Ireland, 2014). Studies regarding long-term meditation participants who were monitored by an electroencephalogram (EEG) during meditation indicated that these individuals exhibited higher levels of alpha, theta, and gamma activation, which are associated with reduced stress (Glomb et al., 2011).

Leadership is often an extremely difficult position to hold and in high pressure business environments, the amount of stress one seems to handle is often viewed as a badge of honor in the workplace,

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