Efficacy Of Mindfulness Training in Leadership Development

(A Research Based White Paper By Growthsqapes Consulting Private Limited)

Introduction

The Big Question

In most leadership development interventions today, what remains in sharp curricular and pedagogical focus is Mindfulness. As is evidenced by even a cursory search of the literature (Bunting, 2016; Hougaard & Carter, 2018; Reitz & Chaskalson, 2016). Mindfulness can best be understood through the route of what it is not i.e., mindlessness. Mindfulness refers to being aware of the 'here and now' in terms of thoughts, feelings and action tendencies in the moment. It is a state of awareness and practice that involves attending to the present moment and cultivating an attitude of curiosity, openness and acceptance of one's experience. On the contrary, mindlessness is the act of going through the rut of an act without being aware and sensitive of the world around, the consequences, the experiences and even being completely ignorant of the thoughts, actions and feelings behind those actions of the moment. Think of this in the context of leadership and it is alarming to even imagine that any leader can afford not to be highly mindful. Look into leadership failures stories and not being mindful emerges as the principal cause beneath the layers of several leadership derailment factors. More so, given the perpetuity of the challenges of global complexity and uncertainties that organizations are to be navigated through by the leader. If competencies are believed to be set of characteristic behaviors that differentiate effective high performing leaders from the average ones then mindfulness, by any measure, is a core leadership competency. Attention, intention, presence and openness are four critical leadership characteristic behaviors that are markers of a highly mindful leader. The big question is, though being central to the leadership development agenda - are Mindfulness Trainings for Leaders (MTL) developing leaders?

Objective

Fundamentally, this explorative study is to find out the efficacy of mindfulness trainings in leadership development.

Contextualization

The Context of Efficacy - Capability and Capacity

'Efficacy' in the context of any leadership development intervention is about examining if the intervention deployed is indeed building the 'capability' in the leader. Capability here refers to the extent to which the leader can exhibit a set of critical behaviors required to be displayed by her in the role, and the degree to which the said intervention is equipping the leader to display such critical behaviors. If leadership development intervention results in a way that a 'visible change in behavior' (Lewin, 1947) of the leader can be evidenced, it can be construed that the intervention has been effective.

Notwithstanding a semantic debate between capability and capacity, a logical and heuristic interpretation can show that when individual capability increases, organizational capacity as an entity increases too. A reason why organizations want competent leaders to on-board them. The significance of organizational capacity lies in its contribution to organizational effectiveness. Organizational effectiveness is asking the question – 'is the organization achieving the purpose and results as what it wanted to achieve?' A related question - 'does the organization have the *capacity* to achieve the results it wants to achieve' is then obvious.

Thus, the question, are Mindfulness Trainings for Leaders (MTL) augmenting the individual leadership capability thereby enhancing the organization's capacity as an entity?

Is Mindfulness a Capability?

Going by the *capability approach*, a leaders functioning is about individual abilities and actions along with his/her general state of being i.e., how he/she conducts herself towards what he/she wants to achieve for the self and the unique social system, the organization. (Sen, 1980)

Mindfulness is a capability, as when practiced, it offers an array of choices between the stimuli and the responses that the leader can make. Mindfulness is an inner process which when allowed consciously by a leader enables her to experience psychological respite despite several possible constraints around. This 'inner process' proves functional and orients the leaders towards balanced achievement-oriented actions.

Our Research on Efficacy of
Mindfulness Training

Prevalent Practices

Current general trend observed in the offerings on mindfulness training is that they seem to be around well-being, yoga and sometimes with religious connotations. The usual pattern is of a two to three weeks offering amidst exotic wilderness with practices that may be meditative in nature with chants or activities that could be generally relaxing, destressing, prompting mindful observation of self-aided by observed silence.

Some are also known to parallelly offer detoxing diets, activities and initiate

participants to alternative therapies. It requires empirical search to ascertain if these 'programs' indeed help developing mindfulness, though the look, feel and arrangement seems to generate a perception that the intent is to enhance mindfulness. Most participants return-report of 'feeling good', 'reducing weight', 'was feeling calm and relaxed' there. Whether mindfulness as a sustainable got somewhat initiated or not is open to conjectures.

Focused Mindfulness Training for Leaders (MTL) to develop 'capability' of leaders is still an exceptional practice adopted only by those

organizations and prioritized by those L&D professionals who genuinely believe that mindfulness is a capability and developing this capability positively influences business results.

Misdiagnosis

Many organizations and their L&D managers are not able to accurately diagnose mindfulness issues displayed by some of their leaders. They notice the behavioral manifestations of their leaders and being unable to relate these symptoms to mindfulness, they subject these leaders to standard team building, collaboration and emotional intelligence interventions. Whereas such interventions may be momentarily useful, their efficacy in developing an enduring habit and practice of mindfulness is inappropriate. Misdiagnosis happens because the L&D managers lack crucial diagnostic skills needed to identify mindfulness issues and then influence the leader to follow a prescribed scientific mindfulness method. Not only is mindfulness often misdiagnosed because of the held-back and insufficient expressions of the leaders' feeling level state, but also due to a mindset that in a results-driven business organization, such processes which are not derived from any rule of business logic do not deserve time and attention.

Research Design & Philosophy

We took the qualitative route towards mapping the effect of mindfulness training on leaders to decode it phenomenologically. Towards this, in-depth interviews with the participants of MTL were conducted one-on-one. All participants interviewed were Indians, working in India. We intended to develop and validate working hypothesis and models that may be kept open for future research on mindfulness. Along with a phenomenological approach we based our analysis on the realist approach as we wanted to capture the 'as-is' feelings, experiences and insights of the leaders who attended the MTL. In order to capture these feelings, experiences and insights at the highest level of 'as-is', we encouraged free-flowing expressions and articulations of the post-MTL experience of the leaders.

Research Team

The research team comprised employees of Growthsqapes and of *Cfore*, a multi-disciplinary multi-methodological public research organization specializing in leadership research in business, the business environment and politics was engaged. The profiles of the researchers were as follows:

i. **Lead researcher** - A social science doctoral fellow with three decades of multi-disciplinary industry experience having high levels of proficiency in qualitative methodologies. He is on-demand by industry and public research institutes for commissioned research in the areas of leadership, systems and organizations, sustainability, and diversity & inclusion.

ii. **Industry expert** - A postgraduate in international business with more than 2 decades of experience in the management consulting world. His proficiencies are across the spectrum of management consulting practices internationally.

iii. **Research project manager & data analyst -** A postgraduate in business management with 15 years of experience in managing commissioned research projects and multi-level data analysis. She is a language specialist and informs articulations in qualitative research through the Lacanian perspective.

Researcher Statement

In order to ensure gender sensitivity, the research team was balanced with three men and two women of chosen genders.

From a meta-ethical perspective, in order to reduce researcher's bias and stereotypical impurities, the research team members went through internal mindfulness laboratory. We called this an *Internal Neutralizer Laboratory* (INL) and based its design on Sternberg's balance theory of practical wisdom. The purpose was to achieve a *balance* between the *interests* of researchers and *responses* of the leaders. In the INL, we heightened and acknowledged the:

a) Extra-personal interest in generating the right perceptions about this work externally,

b) Intra-personal interest in meeting one's individual unconscious needs underlying one's performance orientation in this work,

c) Inter-personal interest in each other as co-researchers that may influence this research,

and explored to be mindful about how one will:

i. Adapt oneself to the researcher's way of responding in a way that free-flowing expressions are facilitated,

ii. Shape one's intervening questions during one-on-one in such a way that appropriate articulation as intended by leaders and uninfluenced by them as

researchers happens,

iii. Select the data maintaining the principle of 'as-is' and not corrupt it with one's own should-be's.

The team met frequently over the stages of the research. The meeting dates and time were not hard coded to ensure freedom to anyone to call for a meeting. Besides the processual ethical insurance as mentioned above, in each meeting the researchers did self-audits of themselves mindfully.

Participants

The team contacted 100 mid to mid senior senior leaders across industries who had attended different in-person facilitator-led leadership development programmes and mindfulness development programmes. 30 of them responded, out of which 10 were women.

Of the 30 respondents, 8 had attended exclusive mindfulness development programmes; the remaining 22 had attended leadership development programmes wherein mindfulness was covered as an extensive module.

Inclusion Criteria

We chose only those participants who attended a programme which was of at least 3 full days.

The participants' profile at the time of the interview is represented in Figure 1 below:

The mean leadership experience of the participant pool was: 20.5 years (SD: 7.74)

The median leadership experience of the participant pool was: 20.76 years

The mean age of the participant pool was: 45.76 years (SD=8.04)

The median age of the participant pool was: 45 years.

Figure 1

Interview Sessions	Leaders' Industry	Gender	Age	Leadership Experience
IS 1	Manufacturing	Man	60	35
IS 2	Manufacturing	Man	46	21
IS 3	Manufacturing	Woman	59	33
IS 4	Manufacturing	Man	43	18
IS 5	IT/ITeS	Woman	38	13
IS 6	IT/ITeS	Man	55	30
IS 7	IT/ITeS	Man	35	12
IS 8	IT/ITes	Woman	45	20
IS 9	IT/ITes	Man	50	24
IS 10	Eng & Construction	Man	52	27
IS 11	Eng & Construction	Woman	40	14
IS 12	Eng & Construction	Man	48	23
IS 13	Eng & Construction	Man	35	12
IS 14	Pharmaceutical	Man	54	30
IS 15	Pharmaceutical	Woman	32	5
IS 16	Pharmaceutical	Man	44	18
IS 17	Pharmaceutical	Man	36	11
IS 18	Professional services	Man	60	31
IS 19	Professional services	Woman	37	13
IS 20	Professional services	Man	38	14
IS 21	Professional services	Woman	44	20
IS 22	BFSI	Man	44	18
IS 23	BFSI	Woman	38	14
IS 24	BFSI	Man	51	25
IS 25	BFSI	Man	58	33
IS 26	Media	Man	52	28
IS 27	Media	Man	48	24
IS 28	Media	Woman	45	22
IS 29	FMCG	Man	40	14
IS 30	FMCG	Woman	46	21

Industry-wise Gender Distribution of Sample

Data Collection

Three researchers, 2 men and 1 woman, conducted the in-person one-on-one interview sessions. For convenience and easy interpretation ensuring that language doesn't become a barrier, researchers were allowed to use vernacular language also if the participant preferred so. All the three researchers followed a standard approach of interviewing which began with greetings, comfort and convenience checking, pleasant demographic and ethnic exchange, and years of experience and nature of work. All participants were given voluntary rights to participate and apriori informed consent was taken along with mutual non-disclosure agreement in verbal.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) method was used using Voyant Tools. All researchers approached the interview-sharings and its analysis with the fundamental understanding of the possible positive influence of mindfulness training towards leader development. This was actively practiced during the interview process to ensure that all explorations during the interview remained contextual to leadership effectiveness with or without the use of mindfulness.

Stage 1: Pre-Coding Data Familiarization

All the three researchers recorded the data in English. However, there were extensive vernacular conversations in between. Upon translation before transcription of such vernacular data, the entire research team sat down to validate the translation of that data through sense making to achieve minimum loss of meaning in translation towards high accuracy.

Stage 2: Initial Coding

Initial coding was achieved by identifying the commonalities in sharing emerging as patterns. In order to minimize researcher's bias and subjectivity, commonalities were cross checked across researchers and responses received for accuracy.

Stage 3: Mapping the Themes

All the patterns validated in the earlier stage were analyzed to define a coding protocol. At this stage, the data analyst and the fourth researcher who were not part of the interviews were invited to validate the emerging themes and sub-themes. Basis this, mining the codes and the sub-codes, preliminary them and sub-themes were finalized.

Stage 4: Theme Nomenclature & Review

In naming the themes, relevance to contribution of mindfulness towards effective leader development was given more weight. Thus, names of themes emerged by relevance and theme - sub-theme relationships could be established.
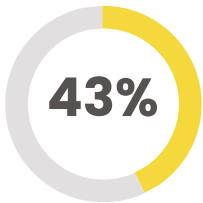
Stage 5: Theme Refining

All themes and sub-themes were evaluated on their relevance towards practical contribution to workplace leadership practice.

Mindfulness Behavioral Practice: Some insights from data

98% of participants who attended specific mindfulness laboratories mentioned that mindfulness changed their leadership practice.
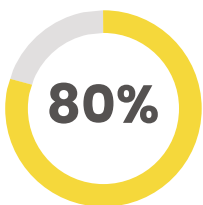
43% of participants who attended any leadership development programme with mindfulness modules mentioned that mindfulness positively impacted their leadership practice.
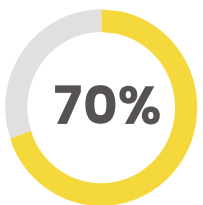
70% of the participants who did not attend any mindfulness programme said that they often experienced moments when they were operating without deeper being-level awareness.

**80%** of women showed more mindfulness.

Results

Mindfulness Efficacy Framework of Leader Development

The result shown by the data on positive influence of mindfulness is given above. The sharings by the leaders irrespective of whether they were men or women indicates that mindfulness practices adopted by them positively influences their whole Being. The context of *Being* is to see the leader at three levels of his or her existence in the role of leadership. The Extrapersonal Being which relates to the outer world with reference to things that are not personal but related to the outer world, the Interpersonal Being which is the leaders' willingness and ability to constructively relate to other people, and the Intrapersonal being which is the leader and his/her inner self-level conscious or unconscious psychodynamic processes.

All the researchers reported relevance, relationships and linkages of the sharings by the leaders and these levels of Being.
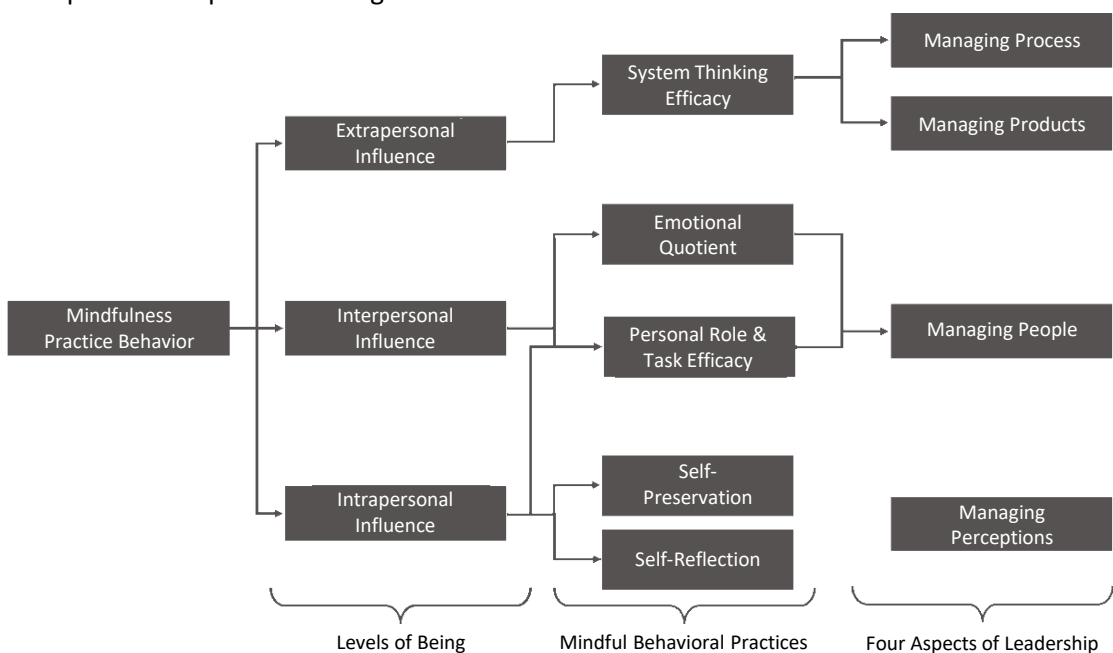
Mindful Behavior Efficacy Framework of Leader Development©®

Efficacy of Mindfulness on Leader Development

Fundamentally, any leader in his or her leadership role is expected to lead and manage four aspects:

i.   Lead and Manage *Process* (LMP - 1)

ii.   Lead and Manage *Products* (LMP - 2)

iii.   Lead and Manage *People* (LMP - 3)

iv.   Lead and Manage *Perception* (LMP - 4)

All the above aspects of leadership are influenced by the three levels of Being through mindfulness practices and behaviors.

Mindfulness Behavioral Practices (MBP)

1. Extrapersonal Influence

Attention, Focus & Thinking

It is learnt from the leadership sharings that those leaders who had been into consciousness enhancing practices like meditation and deep relaxation have shown that their comprehension of the larger environment that they exist in is much sharper than those who do not. It is to be clarified that the spectrum of such practices ranged from simple concentration exercises to higher levels of meditative methods through guided prayers of popular preachers.

Our data analysis on this aspect revealed that some leader development programs which had extensive mindfulness modules were also reported to be very rich in their 'strategic thinking and orientation' component. Though the purpose of these interviews was not like typical behavioral event interviews to identify components, it was evident that leaders with MBPs claims of success had strong relations to some strategic responsibility that they delivered. This indicates that long-term practice of MBPs positively influences the leaders' extrapersonal being by way of enhancing its capability to be better in *Systems Thinking.* Strategic thinking efficacy augments the leaders' capability towards managing products and processes.

2. Intrapersonal Influence

Relationship Building & Personal Efficacy

A leader's effectiveness is highest when the leader becomes sensitive, rather mindful about his/her role. Role sensitivity refers to the leader's capability to map the expectations people have from him/her. Further, very few are indeed aware of the *role* that they are expected to play and confuse the same with *responsibilities.* As a result, these leaders are high on operations but their effectiveness as a

leader may not be evidenced. Such an operations-oriented existence without being sensitive to the expectations of others makes the leader suffer from mindlessness. Mindlessness manifests in the way of displaying inappropriate leadership style in certain situations and makes the leader's people management behavior very poor. On the contrary, leaders who practice mindful behaviors also develop skills and competencies around emotional intelligence. They relate to people well and are known to balance their leadership approach both through the head and the heart. The data analysis corroborates this.

That mindfulness behavioral practice gives poise, balance and thereby effectiveness to leaders, is evidenced by data. It is seen that leaders who are organized, manage time well do not lose temper in stressful situations are those who have adopted some mindfulness technique. About 10% of all leaders interviewed said that they tried to practice some mindfulness technique even before they attended any mindfulness and leadership development programme. Clearly, mindfulness practice behavior is evidenced to positively influence the 'interpersonal' self of the leader and this in turn generates the capability to lead and manage people even better.

3. Interpersonal Influence

Self-Preservation & Self-Reflection

Whether in today's "VICCASS (variety, interdependency, complexity, change, ambiguity, seamlessness and sustainability)" (Veldsman & Veldsman, 2017, p.116) environment or during Henry Ford's early manufacturing days, leading organizations have always taken a toll on leaders' time, energy , effort and social relationships. Man being a social animal, though it is often said, 'not to bother about what others say', deep in the heart consciously or unconsciously our assumptions of what others think of us, do matter to us. Especially for leaders, managing perceptions is a significant part of their role. Perceptions may not be reality every time, but perception is a reality about the leader that gets built in the mindscape of the people he/she leads.

How does mindfulness behavioral practice help in managing perceptions? Those leaders who at their intra-level protect their self-esteem and self-concept from being impacted by aspersions and modern-day trolls, even if the leader is doing the right thing – the leader must protect himself/herself internally. Protection here refers to adopting methods of self-care for self-preservation to develop resilience and not break as a fragile object.

Doing right things versus doing popular things, to reward hardwork or to reward results, are some of the questions that interrogates the value system of the leader. These value-based decision choices build perceptions not only about the leader as a person but also about the organization. It is during such situations that mindfulness helps. From the discursive data quoted below,

> [*"I do the right things for the organization…I know eventually people will understand…Sometimes people blame me….For me the organization and its results are important….I have to take care of people but ….Time will tell them that I was not wrong"*]
>
> [*"I tell myself….Sometimes I take time out to think…In my prayers…I meditate to draw strength"*]

it is evidenced that, leaders do delve deep into their inner selves through mindfulness techniques to not only cope but also to attain effectiveness through poise and balance. This practice of self-reflection and self-preservation at the intrapersonal level generates capability to manage an important aspect of leadership i.e., managing perceptions.

Impact On Leadership

The positive force of mindfulness thus has a positive impact on leadership. Various leaders of different age groups and industry shared in confidence the deep inner mental shifts that they have made through mindfulness behavioral practices. Some even enthusiastically claimed that it is through mindfulness only that they have managed their physical self. Controlling the mind to exercise, regulating the mind to stay away from harmful vices, have been reported. Thus, the embodied manifestations of mindfulness towards healthy living get established. We clubbed certain data points to infer the above.

Discussion

Our research highlights 'mindfulness effectiveness' from the systems perspective. The Mindfulness Behavioral Practices (MBPs) are the inputs; the psychodynamics of systems thinking, emotional quotient, personal role and task efficacy, self-preservation and self-reflection are processes; and managing process, managing products, managing people and managing perceptions are the capability outputs.

The level of analysis at the being level having split into extra, inter and intra helps to conceptualize the role of mindfulness in

building the effectiveness of leader development programmes and thus offers a heuristic approach to Learning & Development (L&D) managers and Human Resources (HR) managers to not only understand the 'what' of mindfulness but also the 'how' to include mindfulness in the pedagogy of leadership development interventions.

Conclusion

This research-based whitepaper serves two purposes. Firstly, it adds to the body of knowledge of mindfulness by offering the evidence-based mindfulness efficacy framework of leader development. Secondly, it offers a heuristic diagnostic perspective to Learning & Development (L&D), Human Resources (HR) and Organizational Development (OD) professionals to precisely identify which mindfulness process to activate to develop which leadership competency through what type of mindfulness practice.

L&D professionals, HR managers and business managers would do a great service to *individuals* as well as *institutions* should they take mindfulness as a serious business and not some kind of a fuzzy fad. It is to be noted that no specificity of any particular religious practice, religious ritual was considered as the only mindful practice. From the data it emerges that those who practice mindfulness through theological practices as well as non-theological practices. Some even used mobile applications to support them.

Thus, little is left to doubt that adding mindfulness in leader development increases the efficacy of leader development interventions. The corollary is no leader development can happen without mindfulness development.

It is hoped that this research illuminates leadership development theory, and this work is furthered through peeling of many more layers that constitute the relationship between mindfulness, leader development and business results.

Acknowledgements

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