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Mindful leadership: Exploring the value of a meditation practice

The practice of meditation in the business world is increasingly moving from the fringe to the mainstream, and already features as a key part of a number of international management and organisation development programmes. Emma Dolman and Dave Bond review the impact that meditation practices have made, and report on a meditation research study conducted at Ashridge.

'Mindfulness' in management education

For some years now, various forms of the 'mindfulness' construct have been part of thinking about business, leadership and learning^{1,2}. Isaacs³ has drawn on a range of work exploring this terrain. From one example, she refers to Waddock's argument for the place of mindfulness in management education, where mindfulness is described as

*...the capacity to be in the present moment, aware of what is happening now, and mindfulness practices, particularly meditation, can arguably help move individuals along the development ladder. Mindfulness is based on self-awareness and full presence of the sort that includes not just the mind, but also the emotions, creativity, soulfulness and spirit.*⁴

Exploring the work of learning more broadly, Langer and Moldoveanu⁵ adopt a social psychology perspective to describe mindfulness as a state of active awareness which enables the continual creation and refinement of categories in a given situation – an important component of learning. This capability includes paying attention in the given moment, being aware of the environment and of others' perspectives and an openness to new information. Mindlessness, on the other hand, is the inability to move out of automatic responses or to read new signals which would require new ways of thinking and behaving. An example of mindlessness from this perspective might be the COO of a construction company's insistence on established supply chain management and 'cost effectiveness' in the face of emerging sentiment and regulation requiring increased sensitivity to environmental impact. In this sense, it can be seen that mindfulness has a crucial role to play in enhancing our capacity to lead in contexts of uncertainty and change.

Practical application

Although still seen as somewhat fringe or 'whacky' by some, mindfulness has been well-developed in systematic ways for practical application. Diverse organisations and businesses are now considering it as a legitimate practice, as well as those involved in management, organisation and leadership development. Karl Weick, for example, has used the construct of mindfulness to focus on organisation development. He and colleagues⁶ argue that organisations tend to overestimate the extent to which what they face is well structured, clear and predictable. So, Weick and Sutcliffe have developed a systematic process for auditing organisational mindfulness – the organisation's capacity to operate in dynamic, ill-structured, ambiguous and unpredictable circumstances. This audit explores five main concerns: a preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise.

They were developing this work in the early 1990s and cite, as one example which prompted their focus, the rapid sinking of the car ferry *The Herald of Free Enterprise* in the late 1980s. This disaster cost almost 200 lives, despite the captain having followed 'standing orders'. They claim that the kind of mindfulness they argue for is a vital component for organisations to remain reliable in the face of constant exposure to crisis and change.

Similarly, John Mason⁷ has built on years of research into education in mathematics to make a persuasive case for research and professional development as 'the discipline of noticing'. He argues that *"attention to noticing turns studies focused on other people and situations into studies which learn about other people and situations through learning about oneself ... the central focus of noticing, which is to be mindful, to be awake in the moment... so as to participate*

in an increasingly rich and productive range of options at any given moment." Mason's rigorous and systematic academic approach to mindfulness as a basis for self-understanding and development is similar to the notions popularised through the recent work of writers such as Boyatzis and McKee⁸; Goleman and Kabat-Zinn⁹; Scharmer¹⁰; and their colleagues.

Proven benefits

More or less explicitly, this range of work draws on a wide range of meditation practices more often associated with religion, mysticism, and the contemplative traditions. Whilst the strength of these can be their long-established provenance in contemplative practices, this can also generate opposition and resistance if overly associated with one or other religious or spiritual tradition. Jon Kabat-Zinn¹¹ and colleagues have made considerable inroads here, by basing their work on academic research, working hand-in-hand with the health sciences. Similarly to Waddock above, Kabat-Zinn sees mindfulness as the intentional cultivation of moment to moment awareness without judgment. Kabat-Zinn's work has become established in many medical practices, including the medical faculties of the Duke, Harvard and Massachusetts Universities in the USA and amongst health professionals in the UK¹². Whilst meditation has long been associated with stress reduction and the treatment of depression, it is increasingly being recognised as important in developing the type of cognitive capacities required of knowledge workers in the modern economy.

The business world has, in part, been won over by findings at the American Institute of Health, the University of Massachusetts, and the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard University. These evidence-based

studies have cited the following as specific benefits of meditation for businesses:

- Reduced costs of staff absenteeism caused by illness, injury, stress
- Improved cognitive function – including better concentration, memory, learning ability and creativity
- Improved productivity and improved overall staff and business wellbeing
- Reduced staff turnover and associated costs
- Enhanced employer/employee and client relationships
- Reduced health insurance premiums for the business
- A visible and tangible corporate responsibility stance
- Enhanced employee job satisfaction¹³.

Additionally, the recent 'Response' study¹⁴, led by Insead, found that meditation-based coaching had both a statistically significant impact on socially responsible behaviour and an impact on three factors they had identified as influencing the social consciousness of managers. This was in marked contrast to standard executive education approaches.

Meditation is now being taken more seriously, and features as a key part of a number of business courses. There are increasing examples of the use of various forms of meditative practice in international management and leadership development. One such example can be found in the Executive MBA (EMBA) programme of the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business. Over ten years ago, senior Zen Buddhist teachers were already running introductory sessions on mindfulness as part of the personal leadership component of this EMBA programme. More recently, the programme has introduced a full mindfulness course, based on the work of Kabat-Zinn, and includes regular times for meditation in its schedule. Not surprisingly, Isaacs¹⁵ found a range of responses in her

study of responses to the incorporation of 'mindfulness' in this EMBA programme. These traversed the range from objection or scepticism, to open-mindedness and those who were incorporating it into their daily routine. A number cited the benefits associated with: being present, awareness, non-judgmental attention to the present moment, self-awareness, focused attention to the present moment, awareness of other perspectives and fostering empathy. The study also found a significant inter-relationship between mindfulness, stress management, decision-making and risk taking. In one example, the CEO of a small software company described improved negotiation results and supplier relationships resulting from slowing down responses and being more mindful of options and approaches.

Research study at Ashridge

While Ashridge has for a number of years had its own room dedicated to silence and meditation, this is a relatively new area of its research. We therefore set out to lay the basis for a deeper understanding of the value and limitations of meditative practice for employees, and, where appropriate, to feed these findings into the ongoing innovation of what Ashridge has to offer its clients. The purpose of our research project was to try to identify the benefit – if any – of an individual meditating consistently over a 45-day period. If positive benefits were found, then Ashridge would be ideally placed to introduce meditation into its own practice with clients more explicitly.

Design/methodology/approach

For the purpose of this research, we chose what is known as Samarpan meditation. It is a simple meditation technique and is not attached to any religion. It can be practised by anyone of any age or background, and

requires no prior experience of meditation. Samarpan is translated as 'to let go' or 'to surrender' (thoughts, emotions, situations). The aim of the meditation is to reach a state where the mind is quietened and there are no thoughts. This enables those meditating to connect to a state from where they can derive more energy. It increases feelings of calmness and relaxation, and makes the practitioner feel that life is more balanced. Paradoxically, this is also a state that allows for a sharper awareness of what is actually 'going on'.

Although this is a 'new' technique from the Himalayas, it has ancient origins. The meditation is based on a mantra which has been handed down over 800 years from teacher to only one pupil within the Himalayas. In 2000, Swami Shivkrupananda emerged from the Himalayas with the wish to teach it to anyone who wished to learn it and in just ten years it has spread around the globe and currently is being practised by over 500,000 people.

Acknowledging that there is a growing body of research exploring the link between meditation and the health sciences^{16,17,18}, we chose to focus this pilot research on subjective research measures supported by psychological measures. Advice from the Nuffield Health Foundation supported this more subjective approach. We used a reflective journal to capture the results of simple tests related to perceived benefits. Undertaking reflective journalling for an extended period of time focuses the practitioner on the sense of an ongoing journey and allows them to record their mental state and energy levels. This journal was somewhere to record thoughts, feelings, emotions and progress, and any additional events affecting the individual, regarding all aspects of their life and experiences.

In order for the methodology to be robust three groups were created as outlined here:

Group 1 were asked to meditate using the prescribed technique for 45 days, and to undertake some psychometric tests. They were asked to keep a journal for the duration of the research, as well as completing a 'Life Wheel' every two weeks to indicate satisfaction with different areas of their lives.

Group 2 were asked to take 30 minutes out of their day for 45 days and undertake an activity that they were not used to doing, but one that involves very little higher cognitive activity, e.g., walking, having a bath, knitting, etc.

Group 3 were the control group, who were asked not to undertake any activity different from their everyday life, but who completed all of the Group 1 psychometrics at the appropriate times.

Participation was sought from volunteers across the broad Ashridge community, including staff, associates, alumni, friends, and family. All the groups were fully briefed on their participation. Groups 1 and 2 had additional briefing and received a pack containing a journal and all the test material. The journals also set out clearly the process of what needed to be completed, by when, over the 45-day period.

Research tests

The research tests that were selected were:

The **IPIP** – a personality test to examine trends in personality of those attracted to the experiment.

Epworth sleep scale – to measure sleepiness.

Stanford sleep scale – to measure alertness.

General health questionnaire – to provide a general impression of overall health.

Mindful attention awareness scale – to measure a disposition of mindfulness – being open to what is happening in the present.

The journal – to keep a log of progress and any significant events, and for writing personal reflections.

Life wheel – to measure satisfaction in 12 areas of life: relationships with partner, family, friends and at work, home, finance, health, work/career, free time, personal development, self esteem, and contentment (Fig 1).

Scale

This scale illustrates the range. Choose any number 1-10 guided by these indicators.

- 1 very unsatisfied
- 5 neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 10 very satisfied

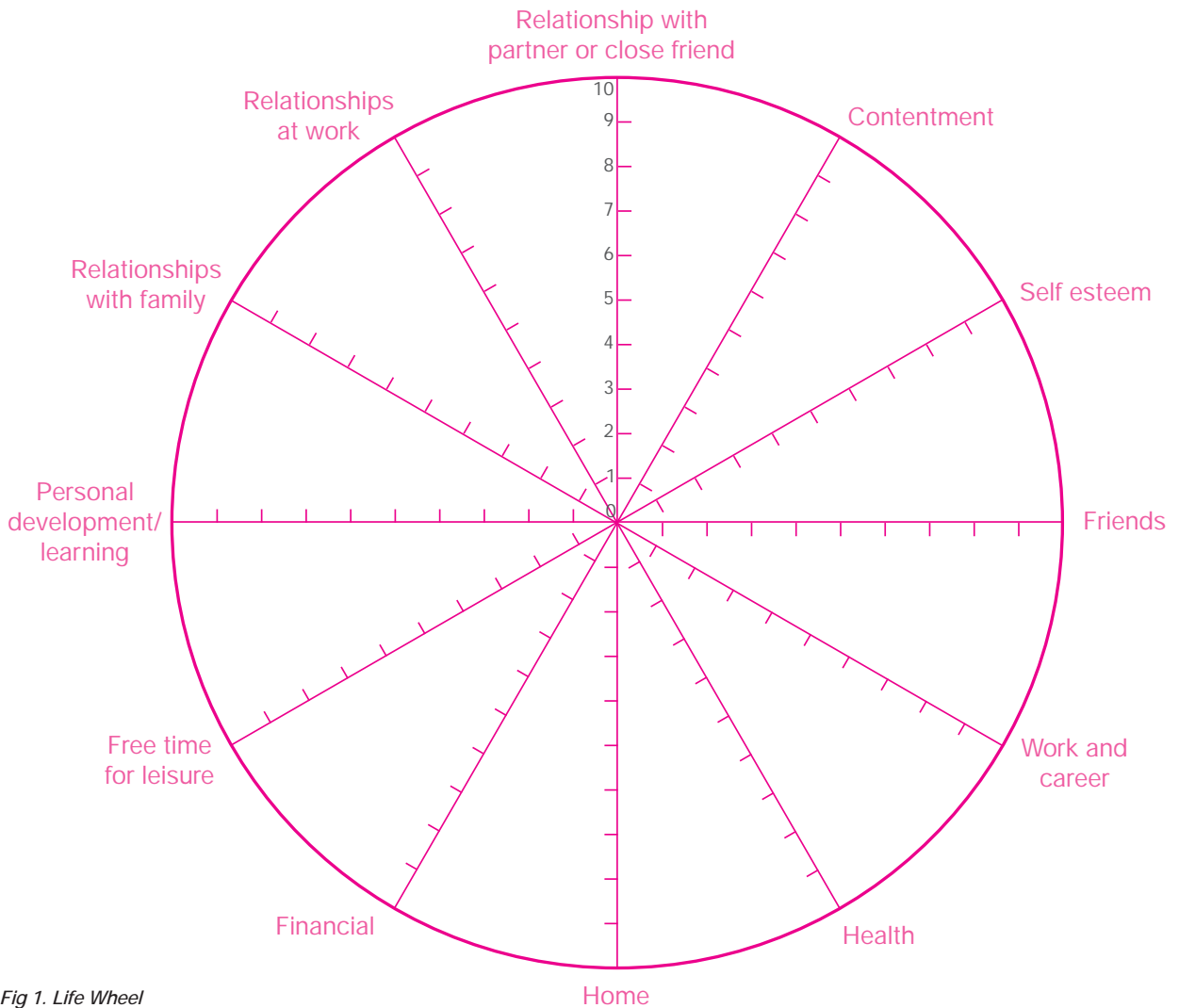


Fig 1. Life Wheel

Research participants

Group 1

There were initially 45 people interested in meditating. Of these, 8 did not start for various reasons, 4 started briefly but stopped and submitted little data, and 2 meditated for a short period but had to be excluded as they did not follow the meditation and research guidelines. This left a core meditation group of 32 – consisting of 27 females (84%) and 5 males (16%). Within this group, 53% had meditated before and 47% were new to meditation.

Group 2

There were initially 25 participants. 3 did not start or submit any data and 5 others did not submit all the data or dropped out. The final participant group included 9 males (41%) and 13 females (59%).

Group 3

There were 20 participants in the control group, of this group 80% were female and 20% male. There was one female who dropped out early on in the process.

Findings

Summary of activity

Group 1 undertook a total number of 1013 meditation sessions, averaging 33 days of meditation per person. In Group 2, 16 participants showed a total of 486 days when activities were completed, providing an average of 30 activity days per person. In both cases this represented a significant commitment of 30 minutes per person per activity day. Of the meditating group, 53% had meditated previously, while 47% had not.

Benefits

For Group 1, a remarkable 90% noted benefits from having participated in the

meditation process. Group 1 participants were asked to prioritise the benefits they found. Interestingly, out of all the benefits listed, 61% noted 'feeling of calm', 30% listed 'enjoyed leaving everything and having time to themselves'. 22% of the items listed related to improved sleep, and 22% also cited 'having a different perspective'. Other benefits included: feeling relaxed, feeling refreshed, being part of a group, improved general wellbeing, feeling peaceful, worrying less, and having clearer thoughts. The group also welcomed the opportunity afforded by the research process to reflect after the 45-day period. This gave a different perspective and helped set the 'journey' into perspective. By comparison, only 52% of Group 2 noted beneficial value from their self-chosen non-meditation activities.

Findings from the journals

Both groups captured their journey by journalling, which provides a rich seam of material. Personal experience and informal research by one of the authors suggests that, when starting meditation with the Samarpam method, a participant is likely to feel heat or tingling in the body as negativity is released. Over time, they are likely to feel more relaxed, calm and peaceful, with a clearer mind.

Therefore, the Group 1 journals were analysed for these key words. (For the purpose of this article, only some features have been highlighted. There is a rich pool of data which will be explored in more detail in forthcoming articles.)

Therefore, the Group 1 journals were analysed for these key words. This analysis showed that 55% of Group 1 participants felt heat in their body at some point, 45% felt tingling in some part of their body, 71% noted that they felt calmer, 64% felt more relaxed, 42% felt peaceful and 26% had clearer thoughts.

To strengthen the meditation experience, participants were also offered the opportunity to meditate collectively for one session a week. It was not possible for all participants due to either their location or their work commitments. However, from comments in the journals, 68% of the group noted that they felt their meditation experience was much stronger when meditating together. Indeed this helped bond the group, forming it as a community where each workday someone would be meditating at lunchtime.

Life wheels

Findings from the life wheels are intriguing. These wheels divided up an individual's life into the 12 areas outlined above, and participants scored their level of satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10 fortnightly during the 45 days. The meditating group saw a statistically significant increase in satisfaction with contentment, self-esteem, home, health, financial, relationship with partner, relationship with friends, relationships with family before and after introducing meditation to their lives. Thus, 67% of factors showed a significant positive change.

Barriers to activity

The barriers for the meditators were reasonably predictable and included: lack of time, family commitments, business commitments, being away on holiday, and interruptions. It is interesting that in the meditating group 52% of participants had critical incidents during their 45 days which would have added more pressure, for example finding out that a relative had cancer, moving house, losing a job, domestic problems, etc. Despite the high level of potentially stressful factors, Group 1 participants still noted significantly higher levels of benefit than Group 2 or the control group.

An external perspective

We asked participants in Groups 1 and 2 to ask someone close to them to observe them over the 45 days, to see if there were any noticeable changes. In Group 1 there were over 13 different changes noticed, as opposed to just a couple of remarks for Group 2. In Group 1, 16 people had sought feedback, with the most popular change observed being an increase in calmness. Other noticeable changes included: 'husband said I am happier', 'going with the flow', 'more energy', 'a noticeable change in temperament', 'more tolerant', 'now easier to be with', 'have a positive outlook now', 'more tranquil energy', 'more open and communicates better emotions and feelings' and 'deals with change better'.

Participation in the future

Asked if they would continue, 76% of Group 1 said they wished to continue meditating, which included some who had not completed the 45 days this time. 71% said that they would continue to attend the Ashridge meditation group and 56% said that they would be happy to do the 45 days again. Of those who were going to continue meditating, 68% were happy for there to be some follow up to this research in six months' time. Asked whether they would continue with meditation as a practice, 48% said they would, and, of these, 43% agreed to follow-up research in six months' time.

Participant remarks

Much of the richness in the data is in the participants' own voices and words. Here are some illustrative quotes:

Group 1: *"I think this should be part of everyone's day"; "Wonderful – the start of something important in my life"; "I think the ability to meditate is an important element*

in the reflection time needed to survive in today's turbulent world"; "Thank you for passing on this knowledge and experience, I feel very blessed and will certainly recommend it to other people".

Group 2: *"I came along just to observe and then signed up and I am glad I did – I really enjoyed it"; "I can certainly see the value of having something routine to do around relaxation"; "Sometimes switching the brain off, day-dreaming, allows things to come up which alert you to unforeseen dangers or opportunities that in the business world would get overlooked".*

Conclusion

These preliminary findings suggest a significantly upwards shift in general levels of satisfaction for individuals who commit to a period of meditation. This is a promising finding in relation to an exploration of the beneficial impact of meditation for the workplace. These findings are indicative, and can now be investigated in more depth. Our study provides early indications to support existing work in this field, which incorporates mindfulness and meditation in leadership development and sustainability. What lies ahead, over and above the more detailed analysis of the data in this project, is a range of opportunities to experiment with and explore diverse meditation and mindfulness practices in the context of client work. The value of this research lies in a number of areas. First, it makes a contribution to the growing body of research on mindfulness and its importance for organisations. Second, it helps to inform public perception of meditative practices through articles for magazines and newspapers. Third, it helps to support the collective endeavour by Ashridge faculty and consultants to develop a range of innovative and impactful offerings in the service of our clients. In particular, meditation can help those of our clients who grapple with the considerable

stress of providing sound and sustainable leadership by helping them ground it in conscious awareness of the complexity of the working context.

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To view podcasts of Emma Dolman discussing aspects of meditation research, please visit www.ashridge.org.uk/research/meditation

More material on meditation will shortly be added to the Ashridge Virtual Learning Research Centre.

Please visit www.ashridge.org.uk/vlrc

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See also www.samarpanmeditation.org

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