

Research has shown that a leader who is attentive, aware and has an open mind will be effective

The power of mindfulness

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Leadership is hard work, and it can take years of training to be an effective leader.

But the demands of corporate life can often derail even the hardiest of people. Over time, a way to manage these excessive demands is to develop resources.

Job demands are akin to being on a treadmill. Unlike running outdoors, one need not watch out for hurdles or deviations while on a treadmill. Likewise, running on a corporate treadmill daily encourages a routinised mindless response to the situations one faces.

Being mindless can be defined as neither paying attention to nor having awareness of the activities one is engaged in.

This lack of focus can manifest itself in characteristics such as performing tasks on autopilot, accompanied by daydreaming and other distractions.

Studies have shown that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind – something that is unlikely to translate into being an effective leader. So, let us contrast mindlessness with the alternative – a more mindful approach to leadership.

Mindfulness is defined as remaining attentive and aware in the present with an observing, non-judgemental and open mind. This awareness includes not just the physical experi-

ence of the outer world but also the emotions, sensations and thoughts within – being mindful means being fully in the “here and now”, from moment to moment.

Two decades of research has demonstrated that being mindful yields several benefits, including reducing chronic pain, increasing immunity, reducing anxiety and improving psychological well-being.

The focus on the benefits has largely been with regard to the impact on the person who is mindful. But given the increasingly interconnected nature of our lives, our actions also have consequences on those around us.

Indeed, studies have shown that mindfulness impacts people's social relationships, helping them to identify and communicate their emotions better with their partner, and regulate their expressions of anger. It can also make individuals more empathetic, as well as more collaborative and less adversarial.

So, if mindfulness can improve social relationships, can it also be beneficial, specifically in improving leader-follower or supervisor-employee relationships in the workplace?

My research at the National University of Singapore Business School with colleagues in Singapore and London examined how the quality of a leader's

attention and awareness in their interactions with others affects his team's well-being and performance.

Employees with mindful supervisors were found to become less emotionally exhausted, felt less emotionally drained from their work, and had better relationships with their supervisors. In turn, these improved relationships translated into noticeably better performances at the workplace.

Plus, subordinates of mindful leaders tend to be better corporate citizens and are less likely to engage in deviant behaviour. They show more genuine concern and courtesy towards their co-workers and have less tendency to engage in behaviour such as taking property from the workplace for personal use.

HEALTHIER WORK CLIMATE

By taking a mindful approach, bosses can help create a healthier work climate by building a collaborative organisational spirit that can in turn benefit the firm.

The primary reason for this is that employees feel better about themselves and their work when they have a mindful boss. They reported feeling a greater sense of well-being and having their psychological needs satisfied.

Understanding this helps to shed light on the social benefits of mindfulness. In other words, when you are mindful, you not

only benefit yourself – you create a more salubrious environment around you too.

But is mindfulness a trait we can cultivate, or it is something we are born with?

Although mindfulness was measured in the study as a naturally varying characteristic of people, there is evidence that it can be cultivated.

Meditation is usually one of the primary means. There are a number of smartphone apps, such as Calm and Headspace, that offer mindfulness-based practices for the busy leader to adopt.

Gadgets, such as Muse and Spire, can also help to measure physiological signals from the body and provide biofeedback to enhance mindfulness.

But there has been some criticism about the indiscriminate use of mindfulness as a panacea for all ills. Mindfulness-based

practices should be used in consultation with a healthcare provider for people with any known mental health issues. It may even be necessary to tailor the practice to the individual concerned in such cases. The research on this is not yet conclusive.

The bottom line is that since there are benefits to being mindful, we can cultivate mindfulness using reliable techniques. Corporations and community centres should consider encouraging mindfulness among their employees and the community.

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The opinions expressed are those of the writer and do not represent those of NUS.