TO LEAD: HERE AND NOW! SPECIFICALLY MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUES IN THE SERVICE OF LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

"...not many years ago, it was access to information and movement that seemed our greatest luxury... nowadays it's often freedom from information, the chance to sit still, that feels like the ultimate prize." (Pico Iyer, 2014, page 15). Mindfulness focuses on the "here and now" without judgment, reaction or the intent to influence.

During the last decade, the practice of mindfulness meditation in business life, in the military and in professional sports, has become a major trend. But what is the reason behind the success of mindful techniques? Why do western capitalism look for inspiration in eastern mysticism?

In our pilot study we tried to investigate how mindful meditation can answer the challenges of today's executives, and by introducing such methods what conditions should be considered.

1. Introduction

It is a common assertion that early 21st century economic leadership has been synonymous with a fast-paced tempo, fragmentation as a result of multi-tasking, major work-related stress and the drastic disruption of work-life balance. As a consultant for leadership development, the most common individual requests for coaching are aimed at stress management, how to cope with burnout and being more efficient at work. Corporate HR clients often request training on these topics in behalf of executives. In the advancement of such issues as stress management and work efficiency, the question often arises whether it is useful to use relaxation and meditation techniques.

This paper presents how mindful meditation can answer the challenges of today's executives, and by introducing such methods what conditions should be considered.

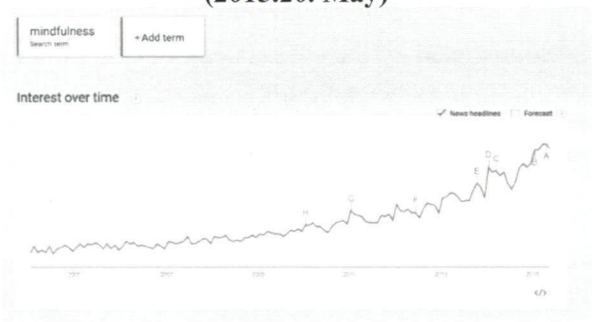
2. Mindfulness grows in popularity among executive positions, in professional sport and in the army

Previously meditation, according to public opinion, was linked to eastern monks, esotericism, and zealous philosophers. Formerly, meditation was only spoken of in the working environment in the context of those practicing a religion or the hippie movement. However, today at the corporate level and in business life the practice of meditation has become a major trend and a variety of executives stand behind the movement promoting meditation techniques.

In 2013, the Huffington Post was already predicting that 2014 would be the year of mindfulness. This was anticipated based on analysis of dominant trends, made by one of the world's largest marketing communications brands: J. Walter Thompson Worldwide, international advertising agency (Gregoire 2014).

This rapid growth in popularity is eloquent proof that when performing a frequency analysis on the term mindfulness in the most renowned web search engine we find the number of searches increasing at a very high rate each year.

Figure 1. Google Trends analysis on Mindfulness from 2005 till 2015 (2015.20. May)



https://www.google.hu/trends/?hl=hu

If we examine the popularity of mindfulness with regards to corporate executives, we see more and more organization and media statements appearing where admired, recognized economic leaders are promoting mindful meditation, for example Ray Dalio founder of Bridgewater Associates, Bill Ford (Chief Executive Officer of Ford Motor Company), Rupert Murdoch (Chairman and CEO of News Corporation), Padmasree Warrior (Chief Technology & Strategy Officer of Cisco Systems), Larry Brilliant (President of Skoll Global Threats Fund), Evan Williams and Biz Stone (Co-founders of Twitter) (Gelles, 2015).

Large successful corporations such as Google, Facebook, Goldman Sachs, Credit Suisseruns, Aetna, and General Mills, are introduced to the daily organization practice of mindful meditation (Zimmermenn et al 2015).

As the science of management executives also often inspired by professional sports organizations and the work of professional coaches. Pete Carroll, the head coach for the Seattle Seahawks who led the team to Super Bowl victory in 2014 (with the third-largest win differential), stated that an important factor in their win was regular meditation practiced by his team, a training routine introduced a few years ago to achieve better results (Puff, 2014).

In several interviews legendary basketball players Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant also reported that during game time they can achieve top performance in a meditative state. Jordan and Bryant attribute their abilities to mindful meditation taught by sport psychologist George Mumford (Mumford 2015). As Mumford stated: "If you really look at the elite athletes, you will find they have this ability to be in a moment and actually slow things down" (Zimmermenn et al 2015).

Elizabeth Stanley, a Georgetown University researcher, former soldier and peacekeeper, used her personal experience and many years of research to develop a 20 hour, 8-week long mindfulness MMFT program (Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training) for the US Navy and a research and education institute dedicated to its study (see The Mindfitness Training Instiute). The MMFT program prepares a soldier for extreme emotional exertion that occurs during deployment as well as the management of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) using mindfulness training. In terms of its objectives, the MMFT program has proven very successful (Johnson 2014). Demonstrated by the soldiers participating in the research-based program the following results can be reported:

- stronger focus on the task at hand and elimination of distracting thoughts;
- better situation awareness capability under chaotic conditions;
- decreased post-traumatic stress symptoms;
- family life becomes calmer;
- improved collaboration and communication at the team level;
- improved self-awareness, particularly among executives (Stanley et al 2011).

3. Defining mindfulness meditation technique

Although mindful meditation exercises can be traced back to the roots of Buddhism, meditation techniques devoid of spirituality which are also used in western clinical medicine were developed for "Western consumption" by Prof. Jon Kabat-Zinn. Easy techniques that can be practiced on a daily basis in almost any situation make it easier to master mindful meditation. After all, the most mundane actions and conditions are suitable to deepen mindfulness so that its practice can be built-in to working situations and you can exercise in both formal and informal ways (e.g. sitting meditation, respiratory monitoring or mindful eating) (Szondy 2012).

Mindfulness, according to the definition of Kabat-Zinn, is nothing more than a deliberate focus on the present moment without judgment and evaluation (Kabat-Zinn 1994, Lutz et al 2008). The original Kabat-Zinn model contained 5 main

features of this approach and when this methodology began to be used clinically another 5 characteristics were added by Shapiro and Schwartz, thus the role of mindfulness is defined by the following 10 characteristics (Shauna et al 2012): 1.) Nonjudgmental, 2.) Effortless, 3.) Acceptance, 4.) Patience, 5.) Trust, 6.) Openness, 7.) Letting go, 8.) Gentleness, 9.) Generosity, 10.) Empathy

It is apparent from the above-mentioned characteristics that the majority are opposed to the institutional and economic world requirements of today's executives. Since the foundation of everyday management decisions is based on evaluation and standardization, what executive doing business in the 21st century can afford to ignore these norms. An effortless and letting go attitude is considered a weakness, rather than a virtue. For an executive to exhibit a gentle and generous spirit in full confidence amidst the fierce competition of the business world would seem a naive approach. It is also considered unwise business advice to not immediately correct a bad experience (e.g. failed businesses or failed projects), but rather first step back and observe and embrace the feeling associated with it. Decisions and results should be within reach as soon as possible using strategic thinking, looking at the situation with future perspectives and learning from past mistakes. In comparison, mindfulness focuses on the "here and now" without judgment, reaction or the intent to influence. Experience the present situation in all its reality (If, for example, the current situation causes you anxiety, then along with the realized anxiety, live through it with mindfulness).

What could better prove the effectiveness and usefulness of a seemingly different operation mode from what is expected of executives than the empirical results?

4. Empirical proofs with regard to the performance of mindfulness

4.1. Empirical basis

In recent years research examining mindful meditation has become very popular, therefore yielding ample results. For example, in a research summary article in the JAMA Internal Medicine Journal 47 mindfulness research works were analyzed. A total of 3,515 subjects were studied regarding the impact of meditation on depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia, drug use, diabetes, heart failure, cancer and chronic pain (Goyal et al 2014). On average 8-10 mindful meditation programs were found to moderately reduce pain and decrease the symptoms of anxiety and depression, furthermore, these training courses were shown to not only carry short-term effects since the beneficial effects of the meditation were still visible six months later.

Lisa Flook studied mindful meditation training effects on teachers with burnout. After the completion of mindfulness-based training courses the following effects were observed in the teachers: by the end of the year stress levels had decreased, improvement detected in organized classroom work, and accepted themselves better for who they are.

In contrast, the teachers who did not attend the training, displayed increased stress levels and, by the end of the school year, signs of burnout (Flook 2013).

Jain and colleagues compared the effects of relaxation techniques with the effects of mindful meditation techniques.

Table 1: Comparing relaxation with mindfulness techniques

	Relaxation (somatic relaxation)	Mindful meditation
Stress reduction	X	X
Positive mood	X	X
Confusion and anxiety-generating thoughts		X
Rumination (fret) state		X
Anxiety (trait)		X

(Jain et al, 2007).

4.2. Evidence on neuronal levels

What could make a technique more convincing than a specific irrefutable neurological effect that can be detected as a result of the exercising phase (e.g. strengthening of synaptic potential in certain areas of the brain).

In a study published in New Scientist Magazine, researchers at the University of Wisconsin studied the brain activity of Buddhists skilled in meditation using a brain imaging procedure. According to the study during meditation the left prefrontal lobe is active, which among other things is the area of the brain responsible for our feelings and mood. The research also showed that people who practice meditation display more activity in this part of the brain even when they are not meditating (news.bbc.co.uk).

Other research has also confirmed that long-term meditation creates greater synaptic density in the dorsolateral and the medial prefrontal cortex as well as in the right insula (Luders et al 2012). That is by taking advantage of the neural plasticity (changing capacity of the brain) through the practice of meditation an actual change occurs in the brain in the area that is responsible for introspection, empathy, emotional stability, morality and effective communication (Hölzel et al 2011). Such performance is essential to leadership practices.

In another study (8-week long mindfulness-based stress reduction training with MRI examination) participants reported a decrease in stress levels which correlated with decreased gray matter density in the amygdala, which plays an important role in experiencing anxiety and stress (McGreevey 2011).

Further results were obtained while studying employees of a Biomedical company who received the 8-week long mindfulness training. A significant increase

was found in the frontal region of the left hemisphere, areas related to positive emotions and well-being (Tomarken et al 2004).

4.3. Impact at the gene level

Interesting results can be found not only in the field of neuronal plasticity, but also in the field of gene expression that relates to mindful meditation trainings. During mindful meditation exercises rapid changes in gene expression processes were observed in the study subjects. After an eight-hour long mindful meditation changes were observed in those genes that are responsible for reducing inflammation and pain relief (Kaliman et al 2014). Decreased levels of pro-inflammatory genes correlates with faster physical recovery from stressful situations.

5. Presentation of our study (pilot study)

Together with our research team in 2014, we started to develop an online mindfulness training program which would have meant the adaptation of Kabat-Zinn techniques in the business environment. The test scope of the 8-week long program took place in the first half of 2015, in March and April. The 18 subjects of the pilot study were from among the representatives of the business and consultant world (stock broker manager, freelance consultant, bank manager, project manager, start-up founder manager).

The process took place as follows:

- 1.5-hour initial meeting and filling out of questionnaires: introducing the process, the system and theme by experiencing the personal effect of an exercise, 'initial evaluation beforehand'
- 8-week long email-based thematic exercise series: each week day receiving a maximum 5 minute-long exercise to develop mindfulness skills, with written responses
- 4 weeks into the program another 1.5-hour meeting: discussion of questions and barriers, self-reflection, feedback
- final meeting and filling out again the questionnaires: evaluation, feedback, summary of developer comments, 'final evaluation'

During the 8 weeks, 5 times a week subjects received short exercises, which could be carried out during the day even at the work place, and after the exercises they answered self-reflection questions. During the process, every subject had the opportunity to provide feedback on each exercise. The initial evaluation included an FFMQ (Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, Baer et al, 2008), a Rahe stress and coping questionnaire (Rahe és Tolles, 2002) and a burnout inventory.

As only 3 out of the 18 subjects finished the entire 8-week course, and since the subjects fell out of the program with differing quotas of exercises, the results of the statistical analysis of the questionnaires have been omitted. However, the impact

of several weeks of exercise, personal accounts and self-reflections provided a good model. Here are some examples of those reflections, that were given by the subjects after various exercises:

- 1st week, a stock market executive: "When I focus on these feelings, the tangled and sometimes tedious thoughts are "squeezed out" of my mind, and thus the tension that comes along with them while I keep my attention on my feelings."
- 1st week, a project manager of a large corporation: "The exercises are useful. The effects live on longer than the 2-3 minutes spent on them, unconsciously they are built into my daily routine."
- The beginning of the 3rd week: "The focus on the air helped me to calm down, to block out the daily thoughts and worries, and to prepare for a relaxing sleep in the evening."
- The beginning of the 3rd week, a executive from the financial sector: "Once I was able to focus on myself, it felt as if I had given my brain some morning exercise. Now it can concentrate its focus."
- After 4-weeks of exercises, a stock market executive: "Mindful brushing of teeth and cooking has become a routine, down to the smallest detail. Its a delight to sense the spices and ingredients, as if I would be part of the process."
- After 4-weeks of exercises, an executive from the financial sector: "I have reduced the amount of sweets I consume since paying attention while eating. Mindfully paying attention while I eat, I can enjoy every bite, I only eat one bar of chocolate instead of 3. After 1 bar I'm satisfied."
- After 5-weeks of exercises, a startup founder: "The mindful consumption of my coffee and cake became the part of my daily routine. I can sense the smallest differences, even if something has changed although it looks almost the same."
- After 6-weeks of exercises, manager of a multinational corporation: "While I run, I can notice how disturbing thoughts pass, in the past these thoughts occupied me and I was very confused. I can view bad things objectively, they have become more manageable."
- After 6-weeks of exercises, a freelance consultant: "It has become important to have a few minutes to do nothing, or to pay attention to the sport while I'm playing, to have a few minutes before starting to work so that upon my arrival I can shut out everything."
- After 7-weeks of exercises, a freelance consultant: "Now I can pay attention to my breathing in difficult situations. This kind of breathing is a new revelation."
- 7th week, an executive: "When I digress in thought, my motivation has helped me to return, to perform the exercises correctly. As if I would have an inner narrator who helps me to return."

From these quotations it is apparent that the attitudes developed by these exercises and the routines related to mindfulness have become part of everyday life,

shape our views and behavior, even after just a few weeks of exercise. Several people have reported that after a stressful situation they can calm down more quickly, and can return to a well-functioning level, just as many have spoken of the qualitative improvement of the sensational experience of their everyday life.

However, these test subjects most effectively pointed out the organizational issues of the introduction of mindful meditation. Even though all subjects reported that the program was considered to be very useful and they owe a great deal to this period, still sooner or later the majority of the test subjects left the program. Although it was interesting and useful, the 8-week program proved to be too long.

6. The aspects of the institutional introduction of the mindfulness program

Based on interviews conducted with the subjects and the observation of the testers, the following criteria should prevail in the development of an executive program.

A more user-friendly method of operation: based on feedback we can conclude that on-line and e-mail based solutions are no longer practical, especially during the 8-week training process in an everyday work environment. Since the target group of such program in most cases are overloaded and overworked executives, therefore, the use of a platform for such exercises should be as easy as possible. This directs our direction to the development of smart phone applications.

- A long-term, sustainable and motivating program on a daily basis: a significant part of the subjects reported that in respects to motivation they became "tired" after 4-5 weeks. Therefore, a good direction for an exercise platform is a lively (gamification) structure, where, for example, you can gain points or prizes by completing an exercise, with fill-in the blanks, or embedded in the framework of a story you can acquire certain tools or merits, etc. A very dynamic branch of application development is the science for making an application more lively. The personal relationship also serves to maintain motivation in order to provide feedback regarding the exercise. The pilot program contained only 3 such face-to-face meetings and based on feedback it can be assumed that bi-weekly or even weekly meetings would assist subjects to carry on with the course. This feature can be replaced partly with an on-line community platform where subjects can jointly participate in their exercises, sharing experiences on a daily basis. However, regular face-to-face meetings are likely to provide invaluable impact on motivation. Feedback from the 3 support meetings underlines this observation.
- Suitable "enhancements": when speaking about mindful-based training courses for executives it is important that the language of the training program be masculine which will be viable in a competitive institutional culture that does not tolerate weakness. Many executives are accustomed to a hard,

so-called "macho" culture, therefore the exercises should be a good fit for such an environment (e.g. sports or warrior analogies connected to meditation within the framework of gaming exercises referred to at the beginning that fit the executive lifestyle). Training sessions using warrior exercises have worked well throughout the program as classic mindfulness practice, e.g. observing (Kabat-Zinn 1990) the eating of a raisin in relation to another activity like drinking a glass of wine, or the mindful eating of a good lunch. Consideration should be given to shortening the program, or dividing it into several smaller programs, because even after a few weeks there are detectable behavioral and attitudinal effects reported by the subjects.

- Anonymity, discretion: for executives a key aspect is anonymity when they are working closely with each other or when in a competitive setting with other executives, since in such cases an executive will not consent to such a program where anonymity is not ensured (especially in the case of burnout therapy). Therefore, during a shorter training program special attention must be paid to the composition of the group (e.g. different industries, groups of executives within one organization or even groups of executives from different fields).
- Reduce frustration: missing a few of the daily exercises may cause frustration among the subjects (exercises begin to pile up). Test subjects reported that as exercises began to pile up guilt started to increase for not having completed exercises that may have been useful, after a while they did not even return to complete missed exercises, but instead dropped out of the program. Frequent face-to-face meetings may provide the solution to this issue (e.g. releasing tension and jointly working on solutions) as well as flexible timeframes (a group of tasks completed during a given time, instead of daily exercises).

The pilot program provided very useful experience in understanding the circumstances surrounding mindfulness-based leadership training, as it is not enough for a development program to simply be effective and at the same time popular (prestigious) with regard to a specific target group, it is also equally important to take into account the needs and daily operation of the audience. One part of this is the operating environment of today's leadership with its changing user needs and motivations, as well as special conditions arising from executive status.

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