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Mindful leadership

by Lyn Hopper

*Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?
The Master doesn't seek fulfillment.
Not seeking, not expecting,
she is present, and can welcome all things.*

— **Lao Tzu**¹

The Need for Mindfulness

There is a new normal for library leaders, managers and staff. Increasingly, we have a short-term focus. We have less time for ourselves and less time for reflection.

Demands are increasing while budgets are shrinking. And our organizations do not typically emphasize renewal.

"Instead of encouraging the practices of mind, body, heart and behavior that support renewal, our organizations unknowingly reward behaviors designed to deplete rather than replenish our resources, leading to dissonant, the opposite of resonant, leadership."²

Mindfulness, while it may seem even harder to practice under such conditions, is more important than ever for effectiveness.

Most of us have what the Buddhists call "monkey mind" most of the time. That is, our thoughts are like monkeys, leaping from tree to tree, chattering wildly and distracting us from what we are doing. Managing our attention in the modern environment of excessive distraction and information overload is critical to our health and happiness. Psychologist Ellen Langer asserts that mindfulness on the job can "increase our flexibility, productivity, innovation, leadership ability and satisfaction."³

What Is Mindfulness?

The concept of mindfulness comes from Buddhism, and

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has written about it extensively. It is a technique that has been employed to successfully reduce stress and promote healing, most conspicuously by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn in his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

"Mindfulness is the process of deliberately paying attention to the present moment in a nonjudgmental way," says Kabat-Zinn.⁴ Adam Mentzell is the director of human resources for the audio publishing company Sounds True. He defines mindfulness as "the art of paying attention and seeing things in a fresh and nonhabitual manner."⁵

Mindfulness not only helps us focus our attention, but may open us to possibilities and lead to better decision making. "According to ... Langer, mindfulness is a habitual state of mind in which old schemas are continually re-examined and redefined ... Mindfulness includes openness to multiple points of view and a focus on process rather than outcome."⁶

Mindful Leadership

One of the dangers in leadership is a strong identification with a particular vision for an organization or one's own point of view, leading to a sort of tunnel vision in which other perspectives and possibilities are not considered. Schwenk warns, "Mindless identification may cause managers to think too narrowly about business problems and to focus only on information and solutions that do not threaten their image of the business ... When strongly identified individuals face decisions, they won't think about the decision from the perspective of multiple identities."⁷

Mindfulness may expand a leader's perceptions and lead to authenticity. "Deep knowledge about yourself enables

you to be consistent, to present yourself authentically, as you are. We trust — and follow — people who are real, who are consistent, whose behavior, values and beliefs are aligned. We trust people whom we do not constantly have to second-guess ... Through purposeful, conscious direction of our attention, we are able to see things that might normally pass right by us, giving us access to deeper insight, wisdom and choices.”⁸ Clawson says, “When your center is clear and focused, you are more likely to have a powerful influence on others.” It is significant that in his list of six steps to effective leadership, “clarifying your center” is number one.⁹

Mindfulness can also help ensure that leaders are taking responsibility for their own contribution to organizational difficulties. “In high-pressure situations...many people point outward: They find reasons for their problems outside of themselves. They blame others or the situation and they look for excuses. Good leaders point inward. They take personal responsibility for what is happening and what needs to be done, even when circumstances play a definitive role...” Boyatzis and McKee suggest that leaders ask themselves, “What is my part in creating this situation and what do I, personally need to do about it?”¹⁰

David Lee urges, “If you’re serious about improving your ability to motivate and engage your employees, if you’re interested in making it safe for people to speak honestly and openly, practice cultivating mindfulness.”¹¹ Langer sums up mindful leadership this way: “Mindfulness is attunement to today’s demands to avoid tomorrow’s difficulties.”¹²

Getting Started by Stopping

Mindfulness is more about being in touch with who you already are than about improving yourself, according to Brusman. “You’re developing a profound sense of honesty — the strongest foundation for genuine leadership, which creates authenticity in your efforts to lead others.”¹³

Boyatzis and McKee say that leaders often feel power stress, which means “subordinating everything to your own wants and needs. Compassion involves understanding others and acting to address their needs ... For the leader feeling the effects of power stress, the place to start is by courageously asking a few basic questions: What am I doing here? What am I out to accomplish? Is this what I want in life? Am I being true to myself? Am I happy?”¹⁴ McKee and Massimilian agree: “For many leaders, simply stopping to ask the question,

‘How am I, really?’ is in and of itself a kind of breakthrough, a detour from the path of frantically reacting.”¹⁵

When problems arise, leaders may be accustomed to moving quickly to solutions. But Heider suggests another approach. “When you are puzzled by what you see or hear, do not strive to figure things out. Stand back for a moment and become calm ... push less, open out and be aware. See without staring. Listen quietly rather than listening hard. Use intuition and reflection rather than trying to figure things out.”¹⁶ A helpful acronym for mindfulness practice is S-T-O-P, that is, Stop what you are doing, Take a conscious breath, Observe your bodily sensations, and then Proceed with whatever you were doing.¹⁷

This spacious and mindful approach can actually facilitate organizational health. Tulku says, “When we recognize the quality of our feelings and emotions and come to see clearly the results of our actions, we discover that our very lack of awareness has contributed to our problems ... By working on ourselves, by coming to know ourselves better, and then by sharing our growing strength with others, we create a base of support that helps to make our lives, and the world, a better place to be.”¹⁸ ►►

*Something we were withholding made us weak,
until we found out that it was ourselves.*

— **Robert Frost**

Lyn Hopper has retired after more than 25 years of service in Georgia public libraries. She is the owner of Lyn Hopper Consulting (<http://lynhopper.com>) in Dahlonega.

Notes

¹ George Ambler, “The Practice of Mindfulness,” July 18, 2007, in *The Practice of Leadership* (blog), <http://www.thepracticeofleadership.net/2007/07/18/the-practice-of-mindfulness/> (accessed December 21, 2009).

² Annie McKee and Dick Massimilian, “Resonant Leadership: A New Kind of Leadership for the Digital Age,” *Journal of Business Strategy*, 27 (2006): 5.

³ Ellen Langer, *Mindfulness* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1989), 133.

⁴ Ozum Ucok, “Transparency, Communication and Mindfulness,” *Journal of Management Development* 25 (2006): 1027.

⁵ Shari Caudron, “Meditation and Mindfulness at Sounds True,” *Workforce* 80 (June 2001): 44.

⁶ Charles Schwenk, *Managing Mindfully: Buddhism and Business*, <http://www.buddhismandwork.com/> (accessed December 30, 2009), 94-95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

⁸ *Ibid.*

- ⁹ James G. Clawson, *Level Three Leadership: Getting Below the Surface*, 2d ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 94.
- ¹⁰ Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee. "In a Bad Spot? Try Mindfulness," *Working Knowledge for Business Leaders* (2005), <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/5069.html> (accessed December 30, 2009).
- ¹¹ David Lee, "Manager Mindfulness and Employee Morale," September 8, 2008, in *The Mindful Manager* (blog), <http://mainebusiness.maine-today.com/blogentry.html?id=7688> (accessed December 30, 2009).
- ¹² Ellen Langer, *Mindfulness* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1989), 152.
- ¹³ Maynard Brusman, "Leadership Development for Mindful Leaders — Becoming a Mindful Leader," February 13, 2009, in *Leadership Development for Mindful Leaders - Becoming a Mindful Leader EzineArticles.com*. <http://ezinearticles.com/?Leadership-Development-For-Mindful-Leaders-Becoming-a-Mindful-Leader&id=1990910> (accessed December 30, 2009).
- ¹⁴ Boyatzis and McKee, "In a Bad Spot?"
- ¹⁵ McKee and Massimilian, "Resonant Leadership," 47.
- ¹⁶ John Heider, *The Tao of Leadership: Leadership Strategies for a New Age* (New York: Bantam, 1985), 27.
- ¹⁷ Amanda Sinclair, *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading That Liberates* (Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2007), 116.
- ¹⁸ Tarthang Tulku, "Coping with Change," In *Mindfulness and Meaningful Work: Explorations in Right Livelihood*, ed. Claude Whitmyer (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1994), 171, 174.

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