

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT WITH MINDFULNESS

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Abstract: Mindfulness refers to focusing on the present moment and non-judgemental awareness. It has become popular in Western society in recent decades, particularly under the influence of positive psychology, as it has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Nowadays, we hear more and more about the importance of mindfulness in more and more areas. The world of business is no exception. Numerous international studies show the benefits of mindful presence at the level of individuals, groups, organisations and markets. Mindfulness training in the workplace promotes emotional intelligence and team dynamics. The practice of mindfulness is not just a stress management tool, but a way of life that improves managers' self-awareness, sense of responsibility and quality of relationships. In this paper, I would like to provide insights on how this method can be applied in leadership development to increase effectiveness.

Keywords: mindfulness, leader, leadership development

Mindfulness

The concept of mindfulness

„The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, 145 p.). Mindfulness, or conscious presence, is defined in various ways in the literature. Kabat-Zinn (2003) was the first to study this topic with scientific rigor, and his work remains fundamental to this day. Mindfulness is a psychological state characterized by a focus on the present moment and non-judgmental awareness in every moment. It is a special practice of attention that exclusively concentrates on the present moment. According to Brown and Ryan (2003), the essence of mindfulness is setting aside personal filters to establish direct contact with experiences and responding to them in a less automated and more flexible manner.

Lengyel (2018) provides the following comprehensive definition of mindfulness in his dissertation: "A specific form of perceiving reality and relating to it. It is a highly alert yet deeply relaxed state of consciousness, where the individual mind allows and non-judgmentally observes whatever arises from external or internal stimuli, letting these sensations, thoughts, and feelings dissipate on their own, allowing the mind to quiet down in the here-and-now." (Lengyel, 2018, p. 34)

Szabó (2018) summarizes the most essential elements of mindfulness in the following five points:

6. Focus on and experience the present moment. Fully living the present experience without being disturbed by memories of the past or worries about the future.
7. Non-judgmental attitude. Openness to the present moment and clear reception without labelling, suspending constant correction and mental commentary.
8. Letting go of automatic responses. This means not yielding to immediate, instinctive reactions.
9. Opportunity to avoid game situations. Instead of acting according to usual patterns, we approach the present situation with curiosity, recognizing its uniqueness and novelty.
10. The ability to distinguish between the inner reality coloured by thoughts and feelings and the external, actual reality. Recognizing what exists only in our own thinking versus what is the actual, real situation. This allows us to break away from past patterns and respond in a new, situation-appropriate way.

In recent years, research on mindfulness has flourished, with increasing empirical evidence supporting its beneficial effects on many important aspects of human life (Baer, 2003).

The place of mindfulness in Western society

Mindfulness has its roots in Eastern Buddhism, where the ultimate goal of meditation practices is liberation and enlightenment from a spiritual perspective. The mindfulness techniques prevalent in Western culture have more mundane goals. In recent decades, attitudes to meditation in Western society have changed fundamentally. Practices that used to serve exclusively mystical and spiritual purposes have now been brought to the level of the everyday by modern psychology. They are often used in conjunction with other therapeutic techniques and have been shown to be effective in treating a variety of mental and health problems. Mindfulness and other meditation practices have become increasingly popular areas of scientific research, and this trend continues today (Schlosser, 2012).

The positive psychology movement, which started in the 2000s, aimed to explore the conditions of human well-being, led by notable figures such as Csíkszentmihályi and Seligman. One of the main fields of positive psychology is happiness research, well-being research, resilience, flow, emotional intelligence, and scientific research on mindfulness (Oláh, 2022). Mindfulness is a specific state that helps an individual to achieve a higher level of psychological well-being (Creswell, 2017). Empirical research has shown that mindfulness is excellent for the prevention of various mental or psychosomatic illnesses (Schlosser, 2012).

The primary effect of mindfulness is to reduce stress levels. According to Jain and colleagues (2007), mindfulness reduces the negative impact of internal dialogue and thoughts that quieten down, thereby reducing self-generated stress. Goyal and colleagues (2014) have shown that mindfulness meditation reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression, with beneficial effects on psychological well-being. Sanada and colleagues

(2016) showed in their study that mindfulness reduces levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. These meditation methods also have long-term stress-reducing effects (Konecz, 2020).

Davidson and colleagues (2003), examining the effects of 8 weeks of mindfulness-based stress reduction training, concluded that even such a short training had a positive effect on immune function, and that a significant difference between the two groups was observed over several months.

Achieving a state of mindfulness

Mindfulness is a specific quality of alertness and attention that aims to experience the present moment, while meditation is a means of practicing it (Verdes, 2019). Achieving a state of mindfulness is part of a meditation process that goes beyond a simple technical toolkit. Kabat-Zinn (2003) emphasises that mindful presence is not just a tool to be used in times of increased stress but a way of life that needs to be continuously invested in developing throughout the daily routine.

Mindfulness is learned through regular meditation practices. Meditation can take different forms. Classically, many people think of sitting meditation with closed eyes, but there are many other dynamic methods to achieve the desired mental state (Lengyel, 2018). What these methods have in common is that they focus attention on a specific object. This may be observing a physical sensation, watching the breath, looking at an external image, or even repeating a passage of text. The attention is consciously directed to the chosen object. Eventually we drift towards the thoughts and feelings that arise. We then observe them without judgement and return our attention to the original object. In this way, maintaining a focused state becomes easier with practice (Bishop et al., 2004). This practice can also be seen as training the mind.

As a result of regular practice, this psychological attitude is also reflected in everyday situations. We then recognise our automatic thought and emotional reactions to the situation and learn not to identify them with ourselves, but to treat them as events in the mind, thus maintaining our inner balance (Unoka, 2015). This allows us to manage our emotions and thoughts, as well as our behaviour, more consciously and to communicate on that basis. These skills can be valuable opportunities and sources of change for everyday and organisational collaboration.

Mindfulness and leadership

Mindfulness in organisations

How does mindfulness fit into the life of organisations? This question can be approached from several perspectives: at the employee level or for the organisation as a whole, considering mindfulness as part of the organisational culture.

The potential to transcend our psychological conditioning is one of the most significant effects, enabling new responses and behaviours, thus bringing positive changes in the behaviour of all organisational members.

Even just observing and noticing how easily we get distracted can be helpful. This can help us to recognise how much time we are wasting by not focusing on the present (Weick and Putnam, 2006). We can also apply this awareness to our work by focusing our attention back on the work process. The ability to practice mindfulness is particularly important for work as it is linked to employee well-being and performance (Brown and Ryan, 2003; Hülshager et al., 2013). Research by Indrianti et al. (2024) suggests that entrepreneurial mindfulness provides startup leaders with a solid emotional foundation and cognitive awareness, which is an essential resource for effective business management.

For the positive effects of mindfulness and conscious presence in organisations to take hold, the contribution of leaders is essential (Verdes, 2019). According to Chia (2005), the most important task of a leader is to operate with mindfulness, which has an exemplary effect on the attitudes and behaviours of the people he or she leads. Given the benefits of mindfulness, organisations can be encouraged to apply it at all hierarchical levels. Leaders can be the driving force for employees to take advantage of mindfulness. To achieve this, organisations should be vigilant to assess their capacity for mindfulness in advance when recruiting new leaders, and implement leadership development programmes that help to achieve a state of mindfulness and improve leadership quality (Lange, 2018). A further opportunity for the organisational development of mindfulness is for leaders to implement mindfulness-based operations and communication transparently in their daily routines and in challenging situations, especially for senior leaders who serve as role models for others (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008). Leadership awareness opens the way for individuals within the organisation to be non-judgmental, self-aware and present in the moment (Lange, 2018).

Mindfulness and the leader

In the following, I will focus on the leader, analysing the importance of mindfulness, its applications and benefits. According to Chia (2005), the leader's task is to identify and prioritise the needs within and outside the organisation. This highlights the importance of managerial attention and awareness in organisations. Research by Lange (2018) and colleagues has shown that leaders with higher mindfulness skills are less destructive and more transformative. Their results support the importance of mindfulness in the leadership process and suggest that organisations should invest in mindfulness-based development programmes (Lange et al., 2018).

The work of managers often involves parallel tasks or dealing with unexpected events that can compromise the quality of work. Work fragmentation can be increased if managers' attention is distracted, for example by checking emails. Mindfulness can help to overcome these and manage them correctly, and to make managers more aware on a spiritual, emotional, mental or physical level. This builds the ability to communicate and connect with others on this level, inspiring their subordinates (Ehrlich, 2017).

Experiential learning plays a large role in the quality of leadership roles that individuals are able to fulfil. One tool for this can be the methodology based on mindfulness, proposed by Ashford and DeFue (2012) as a model of conscious engagement that supports the individual's sense of responsibility and emotional intelligence. Hougaard

et al (2016) have created a mindfulness leadership framework to help leaders understand and overcome challenges. (Figure 1) The framework builds on the practice of mindfulness and focus to improve our relationships with ourselves and others.

1. Self-awareness and mindfulness: mindfulness is the foundation of effective leadership, allowing the leader to listen to his or her own thoughts and emotions and to guide actions based on values and goals.
2. Empathy and emotional intelligence: as the leader's awareness grows, so does his or her empathy, so that he or she can better understand the challenges and difficulties of others.
3. Effective self-direction: high levels of self-awareness and self-discipline help leaders to focus on the right things and to act with credibility.
4. Leading others: when a leader is able to listen to themselves and others, they can more effectively introduce strategic tools such as visioning and situational leadership, thereby increasing compassion and wisdom in leadership.

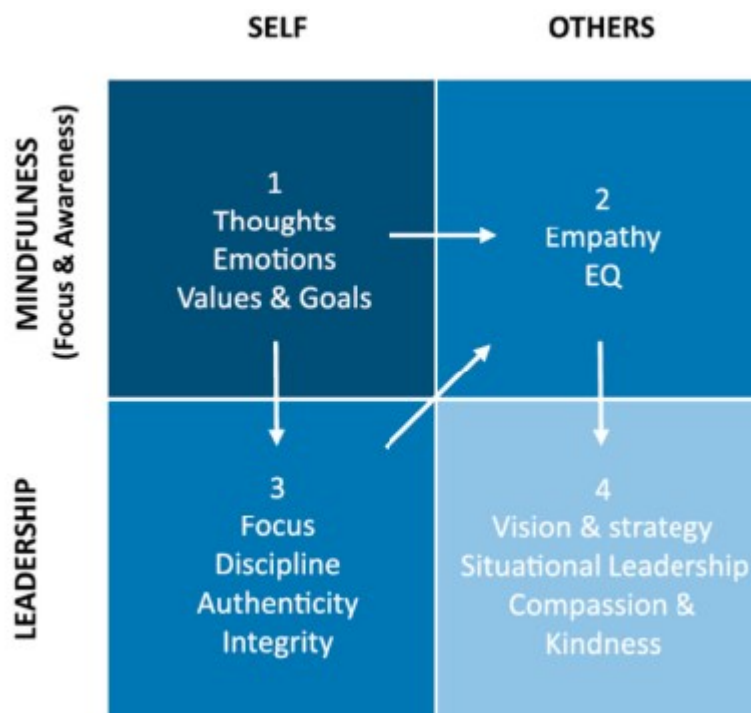


Figure 1 Mindful Leadership Framework.

Source: Hougaard based on Zu, 2019, p. 17.

Empirical research confirms that mindful presence interventions can have a significant impact on the personal and professional lives of managers. Leaders who engage in such practices report increased self-awareness, a greater sense of responsibility and the ability to be present in challenging situations. These practices have a positive impact on leaders' interactions with team members and increase their relationship skills (Urrila, 2024).

Mindfulness leader

The study of Stedham and Skaar (2019) elaborates on how mindfulness aids in self-regulation, emotional management, and social awareness—all of which contribute to a leader's authenticity and reliability.

Doornich and Lynch (2024) sought to offer a theory of the characteristics of mindful leaders. Their proposed theoretical framework consists of three main concepts that explain the characteristics of mindful leaders:

1. attention,
2. awareness, and
3. authenticity.

Inspired by these concepts, they have developed their theoretical framework for mindful leaders as the "three pillars of the mindful leader" - a metaphor that explains the three main concepts and describes the qualities of leaders who regularly practice mindfulness based on existing research. Since neuropsychological research shows that formal meditation as a mindfulness practice can reshape the brain and mind, they believe it is essential to integrate mindfulness meditation into their proposed theoretical framework. Therefore, they propose that the formal practice of meditation should form the basis of "the three pillars of the mindful leader". In Figure 2, they summarize and model their proposed theoretical framework on the qualities of mindful leaders.

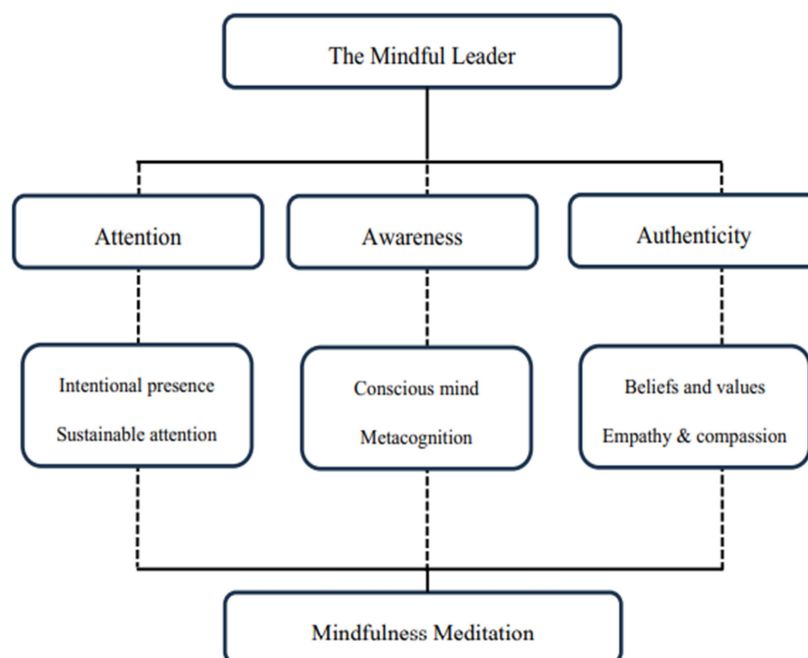


Figure 2 The three pillars of the mindful leader.

Source: Doornich and Lynch, 2024, p. 12.

Mindfulness training

Managers can increase their awareness by regularly practising mindfulness, which includes both formal meditation and informal mindful activities such as mindful walking. These practices are offered as an 8-10 week training course (Rupprecht et al, 2019)

Two methodologies have also been proposed: mindfulness-based stress reduction programmes (MBSR) and cognitive-behavioural therapy programmes (MBCT). These can be complemented by the development of ideal levels of work-related stress (Chiesa and Serretti, 2009).

King and Badham (2018) distinguished between first and second generation mindfulness programmes. First-generation mindfulness programmes, such as MBSR and MBCT, were developed primarily to alleviate symptoms of stress and depression and can be used in both clinical and non-clinical settings. Evidence on the effectiveness of these types of programmes mainly relates to the reduction of psychiatric disorders and stress among healthy adults. In contrast, second-generation mindfulness training is gaining ground in workplace and management settings. These trainings, while secular, make more explicit reference to Buddhist philosophy with the aim of bringing about significant changes in participants by reintegrating the ethical dimension of Buddhist consciousness.

Developing leadership skills with mindfulness

Urrila (2022) developed a comprehensive framework to organize the outcomes of mindfulness interventions and practices, structured into 28 developmental outcomes across four thematic clusters: personal wellbeing, work productivity, relationships, and inner growth. These clusters were further divided into two dimensions: essential and transformative outcomes. Essential outcomes refer to mindfulness practices' impact on managing stress and demanding work situations, thereby improving leader wellbeing and work productivity. Transformative outcomes highlight the deeper impact of mindfulness practices on leaders' self-reflection and interaction with others. Transformative change signifies a lasting shift that fundamentally alters one's way of being and leading. This structure is illustrated in Figure 3.

The empirical research of Rupprecht et al (2019) suggests that mindfulness training can be a valuable tool for self-directed leadership development, promoting emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and improved interaction styles. The study identified several key impacts of mindfulness training on leaders:

1. Self-Leadership Capacities:
 - a. Mindful Task Management: Improved focus and efficiency in handling tasks.
 - b. Self-Care: Increased awareness and practices related to personal well-being.
 - c. Self-Reflection: Enhanced ability to reflect on actions and decisions.
2. Leadership Capacities:

- a. Relating to Others: Better communication and relationships with team members.
- b. Adapting to Change: Increased flexibility and adaptability in dynamic environments.

3. Broader Impacts

- a. Participants reported that the benefits of mindfulness training influence team dynamics and organizational culture positively

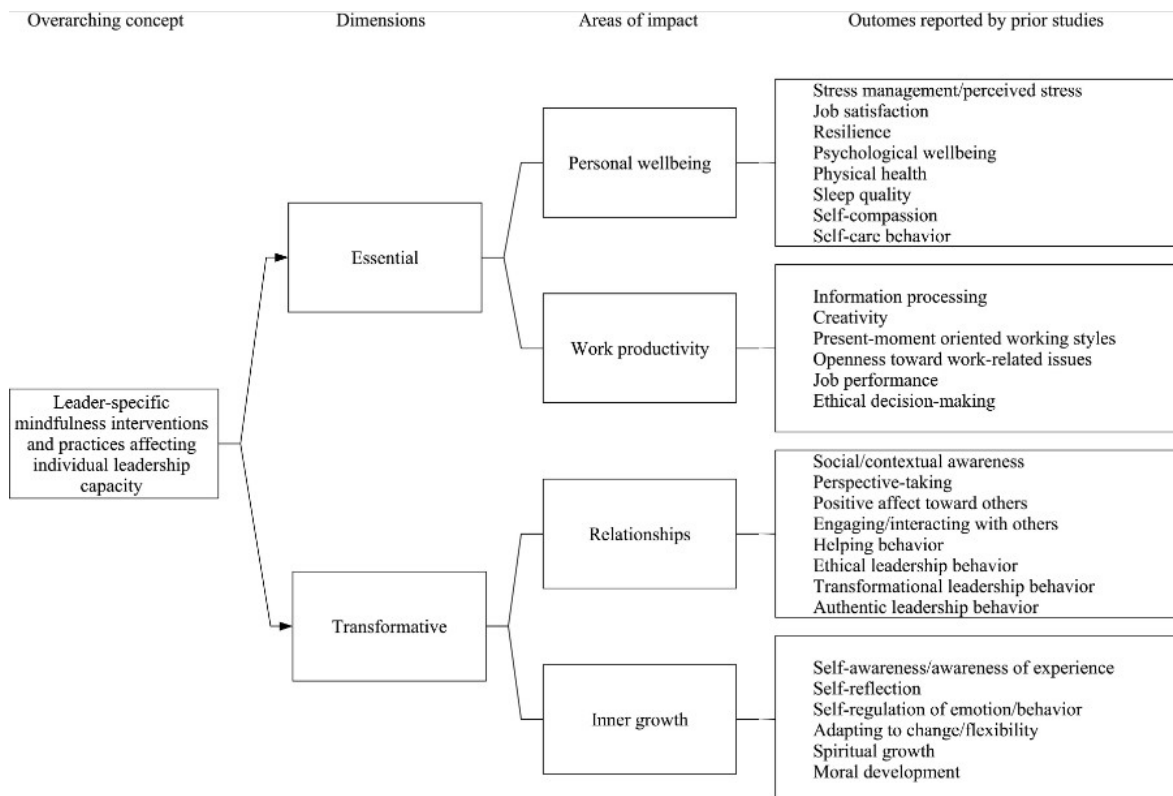


Figure 3 Impact of mindfulness interventions and practices on leaders.

Source: Urrila, 2022, 4.pp

The impact of mindfulness leadership on followers

Arendt et al (2019) hypothesize that leaders' mindfulness positively affects followers' satisfaction, primarily through a mindful communication style. Mindful leaders are more attentive, open, and non-judgmental, helping followers feel valued and appreciated. Additionally, mindful leaders exhibit better emotion regulation, allowing them to manage stressful situations and serve as positive examples for followers. (Figure 4).

The study included 34 leaders and 98 followers from various industries, and findings indicate that mindful communication significantly mediates the relationship between a leader's mindfulness and follower satisfaction. Leaders with higher levels of mindfulness tend to enhance followers' satisfaction both in communication and in general.

This research contributes to understanding the role of mindfulness in leadership, suggesting that mindfulness is not just a personal resource but also enhances interpersonal skills. Practically, the findings suggest that mindfulness-based training could be beneficial in leadership development programs, potentially leading to positive organizational outcomes (Arendt et al, 2019).

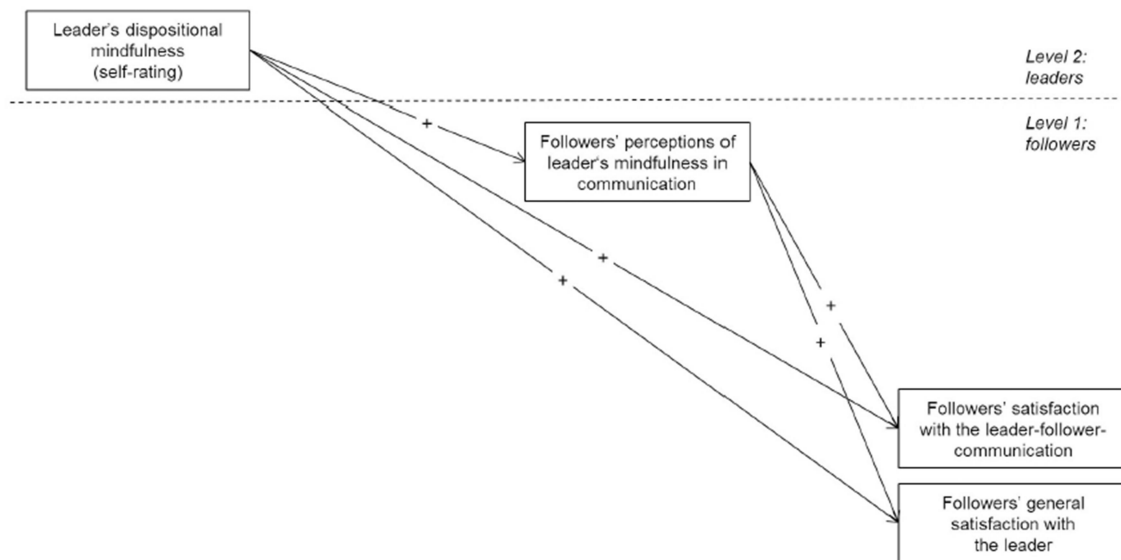


Figure 4. Model of the impact of mindfulness leadership on followers

Source: Arendt et al, 2019, 6.pp

Stedham and Skaar (2019) suggest that mindfulness develops leader qualities and behaviours that foster trust-based relationships between leaders and followers. A mindful leader becomes more open and accepting, which increases followers' trust and commitment. Mindful leaders experience improved cognitive flexibility and empathy, enabling them to handle stress effectively and support their followers, who, in turn, feel safe and more willing to follow them. Empirical data indicate that mindful leaders positively influence employee performance and satisfaction.

The study of Zang et al (2020) examines how follower mindfulness and leader mindfulness impact followers' well-being through the mediating role of perceived authentic leadership. The researchers hypothesize that follower mindfulness is directly linked to followers' perceptions of authentic leadership behaviour, which positively influences their well-being. Leader mindfulness plays a moderating role in this process: when leaders display high levels of mindfulness, it strengthens the relationship between follower mindfulness and perceived authentic leadership, thereby enhancing followers' well-being. The findings suggest that high leader mindfulness positively affects follower well-being via followers' perception of authentic leadership. The study highlights that workplace mindfulness training could benefit both leaders and followers by improving psychological well-being, particularly in environments where the leader-follower relationship and authenticity are crucial.

Stedham and Skaar (2019) the following integrated conceptual framework on the relationship between mindfulness, trust and leadership has been developed based on the research:

Mindfulness → Leadership

Trust → Leadership

In addition to the direct influence of mindfulness on leadership, they suggest that mindfulness impacts leadership indirectly by fostering trust. This results in the following extended relationship:

Mindfulness → Trust → Leadership

They propose that mindful leaders cultivate attitudes and behaviours that build trust-based relationships, which enhance their ability to effectively influence others. This conceptual framework, illustrated below (Figure 5), positions trust as a key link between mindfulness-driven leadership qualities and overall leadership effectiveness. Beyond these indirect effects of mindfulness on trust and leadership effectiveness, they also anticipate that mindfulness may directly enhance both trust and leadership outcomes.

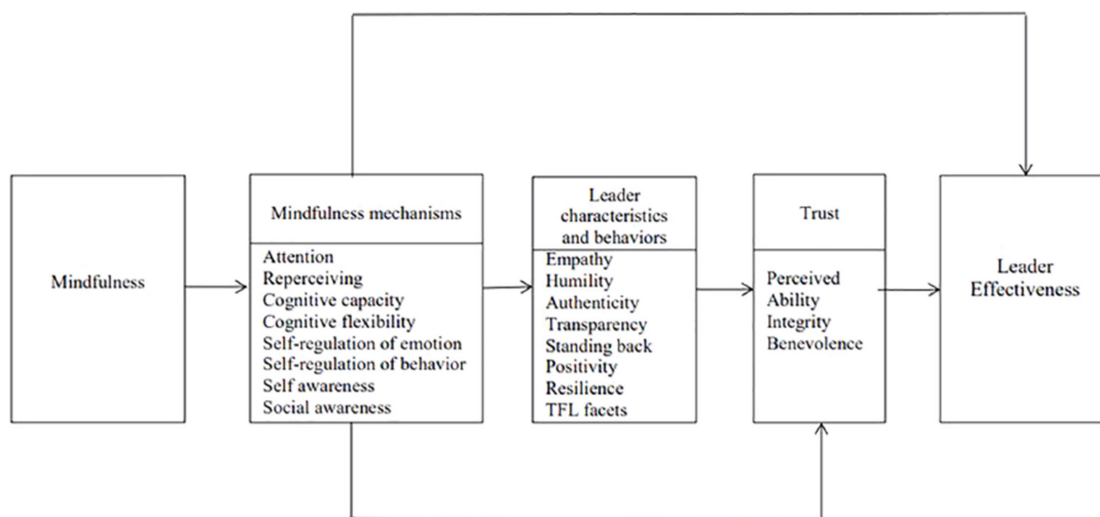


Figure 5 Proposed conceptual framework relating mindfulness to leader effectiveness.

Source: Stedham and Skaar, 2019, p. 7.

The cumulative impact of mindfulness on the leader and through them on the organisation as a whole

We can see that integrating mindfulness into leadership development offers transformative potential in fostering effective, compassionate, and self-aware leaders. As organizations increasingly face complex challenges, mindfulness stands out as a tool that not only aids in stress management but also supports personal growth, interpersonal dynamics, and organizational resilience. Grounded in mindfulness, leaders cultivate greater self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy—all of which are essential traits for adaptive leadership in today's dynamic environment.

Empirical research supports that leaders who practice mindfulness experience not only personal well-being but also improvements in leadership effectiveness. Studies have demonstrated that mindfulness training enhances emotional intelligence, particularly in areas such as empathy, which allows leaders to understand the challenges faced by their team members. Empathetic leaders, attuned to the emotions and needs of others, create a supportive and psychologically safe work environment, where employees feel valued and motivated. In this setting, trust grows organically, leading to increased engagement, collaboration, and overall job satisfaction. The positive effects of mindfulness extend beyond individual leaders, reaching team members and influencing the broader organizational culture.

The transformative power of mindfulness is not confined to the individual leader but radiates outward, influencing teams and entire organizations. By fostering key traits such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy, mindfulness enhances leadership effectiveness and strengthens organizational dynamics. This interconnectedness underscores how the integration of mindfulness practices shapes not only personal development but also organizational culture and resilience. This is illustrated in Table 1. This table shows the structure of the framework and the importance of each layer in contributing to effective leadership and organisational results.

Layer	Key Concept	Description	Impact on Leadership
Core Layer (Foundation)	Self-Awareness	Awareness of one's own thoughts, emotions, and values, grounding decisions in authenticity.	Enhances decision-making, fosters authenticity, and strengthens alignment with personal and organizational goals.
Second Layer	Empathy and Emotional Intelligence	Understanding and responding to the emotions and challenges of others, fostering positive interactions.	Builds trust and rapport, improves team collaboration, and enhances conflict resolution.
Third Layer	Self-Regulation	Maintaining focus, composure, and credibility under stress.	Promotes adaptive responses, strengthens resilience, and enables leaders to maintain consistent integrity.
Outer Layer	Strategic Leadership	Applying mindful strategies such as vision-setting, situational leadership, and organizational wisdom.	Drives innovation, cultivates compassion in decision-making, and aligns short-term actions with long-term organizational values.

Table 1 Key layers and their impact of the mindful leadership

Source: Own editing based on the literature

Mindful leadership development programs, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and other training methodologies, offer structured paths for leaders to cultivate and strengthen these qualities. These programs not only focus on stress reduction but also help leaders develop skills such as focused attention, emotional resilience, and adaptability. Leaders trained in mindfulness report an increased ability to handle

unexpected situations and a greater flexibility in their leadership styles. By embracing mindfulness as a central tenet of their professional development, leaders build a strong foundation for personal growth and, consequently, the growth of their organizations.

Research further underscores that mindfulness has a positive impact on leadership at the organizational level. When practiced consistently, mindfulness can become an integral part of the organizational culture, fostering an environment that values presence, patience, and open-mindedness. Leaders who model mindfulness influence their teams to adopt similar practices, creating a ripple effect that promotes a culture of mutual respect, psychological safety, and continuous improvement. In turn, this culture strengthens organizational resilience, as employees are better equipped to handle stress, embrace change, and contribute meaningfully to the organization's mission.

Conclusion

The benefits of mindfulness for leaders begin with self-regulation, where they develop an awareness of their own mental and emotional states. By focusing on the present moment and observing experiences without immediate judgment, leaders can achieve mental clarity, a heightened ability to manage stress, and a balanced approach to decision-making. This self-regulation allows leaders to react to situations thoughtfully rather than impulsively, fostering a workplace environment where calm and focused responses become the norm. Mindful leaders bring a non-judgmental openness to their interactions, recognizing each moment as unique and approaching it with curiosity and acceptance. This mindset sets a powerful example for others, encouraging similar behaviours throughout the organization.

Moreover, mindfulness offers leaders a framework for consistent self-reflection, which is key to authentic leadership. Authentic leaders are true to their values and act with integrity, inspiring loyalty and trust among their followers. By regularly engaging in mindfulness practices, leaders enhance their self-awareness, allowing them to remain aligned with their values in challenging situations. This alignment strengthens their credibility and helps them lead with clarity, purpose, and resilience. Mindfulness also supports leaders in navigating complex interpersonal dynamics by helping them remain centred and composed. In doing so, they foster respectful, open communication, which is essential for building high-performing teams.

Mindfulness is not just a stress management technique, but a way of life that has a profound impact on the functioning of the individual and the body. Over the past decades, mindfulness has grown exponentially in popularity in Western societies, particularly as a result of research in the field of positive psychology, which has shown that it significantly reduces stress, anxiety and depression.

Incorporating mindfulness techniques into organisational culture can help reduce workplace stress, increase employee satisfaction and improve organisational effectiveness in the long term. The conscious presence and empathy of leaders is key to motivating and managing teams, and as such, the practice of mindfulness is becoming an essential tool in modern leadership.

In conclusion, mindfulness transcends being merely a stress-management tool; it is a lifestyle and leadership philosophy that deeply enhances leaders' effectiveness and the quality of workplace relationships. Mindful leaders are equipped to meet modern organizational challenges with greater insight, empathy, and authenticity. Overall, mindfulness has significant benefits not only for individuals but also for organisations. The practice of mindful presence contributes to better mental health, emotional intelligence and more effective leadership, thereby creating a more harmonious and productive work environment. Integrating such attitudes and practices into organisational life can lead to long-term positive changes that benefit both individuals and organisations. Given its proven benefits, organizations should consider incorporating mindfulness into their leadership development programs and organizational frameworks. By doing so, they can foster a new generation of leaders who are not only capable and resilient but also compassionate, inspiring, and genuinely committed to the well-being of their teams and the success of their organizations. Embracing mindfulness is thus a strategic investment, one that promises both immediate and lasting positive impacts on individuals and organizations alike.

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