HOW TO LEAD MINDFULLY?

The purpose of any organization – be that a commercial company, a government agency, or a not-for-profit organization – is to create value for its stakeholder through the coordinated and constructive movement of its resources, most of which are human. Imagine a typical day in an organization, be that an office, a shop, or a factory. Apart from the mechanical operating of all kinds of machines and the invisible flowing of 1s and 0s within and between computers and smart phones what mostly happens at each moment is that ordinary people like us – no matter if they work as receptionists, marketing managers, nurses, CEOs, cleaners, or apprentices – say or do something that creates voluntary support from others around us, or resistance, or a passive stare, as the case may be.

Now think of a moment in a typical management team meeting in which the discussion and the mood in the room recognizably shifts because someone suddenly says something unexpected like, "I am beginning to wonder if Richard's (the CEO) perspective is really the only way to think about our situation here. I think we need to be much more open with our customers." A few courageous others might nod in agreement despite Richard's menacing silent "I warn you" stare and suddenly what had been a typical going-through-the-motions discussion turns into an intense and fruitful conversation – thereby finally acknowledging and addressing the "elephant in the room" and subsequently illuminating other and potentially better action alternatives.

This very moment is a moment of leading and following that creates real rather than pretended movement between people. To think of the person speaking up in this example as a *leader* and what she did as *leadership* would be an unhelpful abstraction or distancing from what really happened, that is, someone simply taking a position and saying something here and now that resonates with and is actively supported by a few others thus changing the nature of the conversation at the very moment – making it more real and thus enabling the emergence of more promising outcomes.

From the above example you will rightly deduct that I very deliberately distinguish between *leading* and *managing* – the two interrelated ways to create movement amongst people in organizations.

When you *manage* you are in a hierarchical position to tell the people who report to you what you want them to do. Managing thus is based on and limited by the particular job position you have. In contrast, at the moment of *leading* you create voluntary movement amongst people (most of whom do not have to follow you because they do not report to you) by doing something that inspires them to support your move because they perceive it as meaningful. That means leading (and following) are not position-based but behaviour-, issue-, and context-based and thus potentially much more effective and expansive than any of your managerial moves. In other words, *leading (and following)* are simply ongoing daily (often micro-) moves and choices we make from moment to moment that are driven by our intentions – be they unconscious or conscious to us in that very moment. (Mind you, I am not arguing here that managing is not a necessary activity within an organization, I am simply saying that it is not sufficient. To create constructive and, more importantly, voluntary and conscious followership in organizations you need to manage and to lead.

Now, what does mindfulness have to do with leading (and following) well? And what is mindfulness, anyway? There are countless different definitions of mindfulness. However, the one I find most practical is to think of mindfulness as *our mental ability of focusing on any given subject (including ourselves) or sensation for an extended period of time*. Maybe more simply expressed being mindful means *being aware of what is happening while it is happening, no matter what it is.* The *it* might be a difficult question you are trying to answer, a complex argument you are trying to understand, an experience you are trying to savour as fully as possible like, say, drinking a glass of good wine, or a process you are trying to understand deeply, for instance your own thinking process. Paying close attention in this way is an 'effortful' activity (Kahneman, 2011), that is, a task that takes considerable and sustained mental energy to perform well.

Now you might wonder if we can be mindful of everything within and around us all of the time? No, that would be impossible. There are simply too many sensations, questions, problems, and decisions that assault us at any given moment. We simply do not have sufficient mental and bodily energy, and even if we did, we would of course not have enough time to fully concentrate on everything that happens to us in any given moment. Furthermore, it is not necessary, anyway. The process of ordering your usual cup of coffee in your favourite coffee shop is neither as difficult nor as potentially rewarding

to be fully mindful of as mindfully enjoying the cup of coffee you just ordered, or deeply reflecting on the purpose of your life or the strategic direction of your company. In other words, many simple tasks can benefit from the 'automatic' operation of the brain (Kahneman, 2011) that unconscious to us performs countless automatic thinking and decision making processes at any moment in the service of keeping us functioning smoothly and thus being free to concentrate on more important issues. In other words, multi-tasking or auto-piloting is possible and essential, but the challenge of course is to know when to let the automatic system do its thing and when to focus one's attention to consciously concentrate deeply on something one considers important.

Mindfulness is the learned ability to concentrate on something exclusively without being distracted by something else. But, you might argue, as a manager I have so many important issues to deal with that I do not have the time and luxury to concentrate on anything exclusively, in fact, the ability to multi-task is essential for keeping you on top of things. I would agree with you to some degree, but I would add a proviso, namely, we must be able to distinguish between those tasks and issues than can be dealt with without much conscious attention and those that are too important or difficult and thus require time and conscious attention to address well.

However, being able to realize this essential difference does of course not automatically mean that you are therefore able to apply mindfulness skilfully – just as suddenly realizing during a business negotiation in China that being able to understand Mandarin would have been very useful does not automatically mean that miraculously you do. In other words, mindfulness is a skill that can be developed like any other skill, be that counting, skiing, juggling, speaking Mandarin, or playing the piano.

So, what can we focus our mindfulness on? Well, as you might guess, the short answer is everything *within* and *outside* of us, but in order to be practical let us be a little more precise. There are only six aspects we can be mindful of; starting from the subtlest they are 1.) Our fundamental (and often unconscious and thus unexamined) beliefs and assumptions about us, others, and the world at large, 2.) Our bodily sensations and emotions, 3.) Our thoughts, 4.) Our words, 5.) Our actions, and finally,

6.) Everything "outside" of us. In order to as fully as possible address what is really going on in any significant moment in time within any of these six domains we need to be mindful of our moment-to-moment experiencing and also of the patterns of our experiencing over time. For instance, do you usually react in a certain way (*your habitual pattern*) when your boss tells you to do something or are you able to assess each of these situations anew as to what the most appropriate response in this very moment would be?

In this context the aspect I believe is of paramount importance is the fundamental difference between *thinking* on the one hand, and *using* thoughts on the other hand (Bohm, 1996). *Thinking* for me means to consciously and deliberately develop new thoughts (at least new to the person/s in question) and thus new potential action alternatives in the present moment. In contrast, by *using thoughts* I refer to the process of utilizing the outcomes of one's own or others' past thinking. But why is the practice of thinking (individually and/or collectively) important in and for leading mindfully? There are two main reasons for this:

- Firstly, I conceptualize thinking as a silent, private conversation in people's minds (or in writing, as I am doing right now) as well as a spoken conversation between people, and view the organisation as *being* the on-going conversation between people consisting of words, gestures, and symbols out of which patterns emerge over time. Novelty, flexibility and the sense of liveliness then emerge from the introduction of difference into the patterned conversational process. One key source of difference is the development and introduction of fresh thoughts as a result of new or different thinking.

- The process of being interested in and engaged with the question *how am I (are we) thinking about this particular issue here now and based on what?* is a very powerful way of being present to one's live thinking process.

Let me at least briefly come back to the issue of time that often comes up when I am talking to my clients about the fact that the process of becoming mindful and thinking for oneself takes time. "We don't have time to involve all stakeholders." "We don't have time to take two days for talking about leadership, can't we do it in a day?" "Can't we do this reflection in 10 minutes instead of wasting half an hour on it?" I hear notions like these very often from my clients. It seems to me the two main reasons behind this view is the unchallenged, conventional assumption that *time is money* and the individual sense of managers of already being overwhelmed by competing demands on their attention – "*And now you want me to spend time thinking? Oh, come on, get real.*" 'Knowing emerges from, and is a response to, not-knowing. Learning – the process of coming to know – emerges from uncertainty' (Claxton, 1998 p. 6).

In my experience, the process of coming to know and consciously deciding what to do next not only takes time, but requires a high degree of mindfulness in order to honestly investigate one's deeply held assumptions, beliefs, and routine ways of behaving. I believe that 'slow knowing' (Claxton, 1998) – understanding, developing new insights about important issues or situations, and learning to change from *reacting because of* to *acting in order to* takes time – it takes time and practice for instance, to become aware of deeply held beliefs and unconscious behavioural patterns, it takes time to deeply reflect on one's practice of being in the world and of leading. All of this might take time, but with mindfulness as a sharp tool new, more satisfying and skilful ways of being and acting in the world will emerge.

The fact that we develop behavioural patterns over time requires a slight but important addition to our previous definition of mindfulness to say that mindfulness is our mental ability to be aware of what is happening while it is happening as prerequisite for being able to *act in order to* rather than to *react because of.* What do I mean with *acting in order* to rather than *reacting because of*? Very often we do something next because of how we (intuitively) react to something that in our view has happened to us in the past (moment). I might answer your comment angrily because I feel that you made it to make me look bad in front of other people. In other words, I am *reacting because* I feel hurt. In contrast, *acting in order to* means having an intention for the constructive development of our relationship in

the future and you act in order to help make that happen. In short, mindfulness enables us to run our mental programme, rather than being run by it.

To summarize, the practice of leading mindfully is a conscious, embodied and improvisational, paradoxical moment-to-moment activity of being choiceful and deliberate while at the same time being spontaneous and intuitive. This is so because the transitory outcomes of our individual and collective actions can neither be controlled nor predicted, but can significantly impact people and the world at large. By becoming aware of our emerging 'transitory understandings and action guiding anticipations' (Shotter, 2011 p. 60) it becomes possible to realize that we have much more latitude in each moment as to what to do next then we often realize. I believe this is so because the continuous and self-organizing social processes of our human living have neither fixed, pre-determined and inevitable steps nor final end-states or ideal outcomes, but *are* simply constantly arising and disappearing transitory and unique micro manifestations. That means the process of changing from emerging moment to emerging moment is only conditioned to a certain degree by what has gone on before and by what is anticipated in the future and therefore our future is much more malleable and open to what we want to contribute to help emerge next.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ajahn Amaro (2011). Finding the missing peace: A primer of Buddhist Meditation. Hemel Hempstead: Amaravati Publishing.

- Ajahn Sumedho (2007). The Sound of Silence. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

- Barrett, F. J. (1998). Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations: Implications for organizational learning. *Organization Science,* September/October 1998, Volume 9, Number 5, p. 605 – 621.

- Batchelor, S. (1998). Buddhism without beliefs: A contemporary guide to awakening. London: Bloomsbury.

- Begley, S. (2009). The plastic mind: New science reveals our extraordinary potential to transform ourselves. London: Constable.

- Blackmore, S. (2005). Conversations on Consciousness. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Bohm. D. and L. Nichol (ed.) (1996). On Dialogue. New York: Routledge.

- Buddhadasa, B. (1988). Mindfulness with Breathing: A manual for serious beginners. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

- Claxton, G. (1998). Hare Brain Tortoise Mind: Why Intelligence Increases When You Think Less. London: Fourth Estate.

- Critchley, B.; King, K. and J. Higgins (2007). Organisational Consulting: A Relational Perspective. London: Middlesex University Press.

- Critchley, B. and H. Stuelten (2008). Starting when we turn up: Consulting from a complex responsive process perspective. Unpublished article.

- Elias, N. and M. Schroeter (1991). The society of individuals. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

- Epstein, M. (1997). Thoughts without a Thinker. London: Duckworth.

- Griffin, D. and R. Stacey (eds.) (2005). Complexity and the Experience of Leading Organizations. London and New York: Routledge.

- Isaacs, W. (1999). Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together. New York: Currency.

- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). Wherever you go there you are – 10th Anniversary Edition. New York: Hyperion.

- Kahneman, D. (2011). Thinking, fast and slow. London: Penguin Books.

- Langer, E. J. (1989). Mindfulness. Cambridge, MA.: Da Capo Press.

- Mead, G. H. and C. W. Morris (1967). <u>Mind, self and society from the standpoint of a social behaviourist</u>. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Mead, G. H. (2002). <u>The Philosophy of the Present.</u> Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books.

- Nichol, L. (2003). <u>The Essential David Bohm.</u> London: Routledge.

- Pearce, W. B. (2007). <u>Making social worlds: A communication perspective</u>. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.

- Phra, Th. and Santikaro (1997). <u>Mindfulness with Breathing : A manual for serious beginners</u>. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

- Shaw, P. and R. D. Stacey (eds.) (2006). <u>Experiencing risk, spontaneity and improvisation in organizational change: Working live</u>. London and New York: Routledge.

- Shotter, J. (2011). <u>Getting it: Withness-Thinking and the Dialogical … in Practice.</u> New York: Hampton Press.

- Stacey, R. D. (2005a). <u>Complexity and the experience of leading organizations</u>. London and New York: Routledge.

- Stern, D. N. (2004). <u>The present moment in psychotherapy and everyday life</u>. New York: W.W. Norton.