

Learning to slow down? A longitudinal study of managers' journeys during a corporate mindfulness training program

by

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Introduction

In recent years, the interest and practice of mindfulness in the workplace has increased dramatically (e.g., Reb et al., 2020; Eby et al., 2019; Good et al., 2016). Eby et al. (2019) define mindfulness training as *a planned intervention offered to employees that is designed to teach mindfulness skills*. A variety of mindfulness training programs have been developed for workplaces and for specific target audiences in these, in particular leaders (Rupprecht et al., 2019).

The concept of mindfulness has deep roots in the teachings of Buddhism (e.g., Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013) and the word mindfulness is an English translation of the Pali word *sati*, which connotes *awareness, attention and remembering* (Siegel et al. in *Didonna*, 2009, p. 18). Since this first translation in 1921, the definition of “mindfulness” has been somewhat modified and expanded for the use in western psychotherapy and in organizational contexts. Buddhist practice goes back thousands of years, but secular mindfulness training is a relatively recent development. Many organizations are now offering their employees and managers some form of mindfulness training programs (Reb et al., 2020; Karjalainen et al., 2019; Hyland et al., 2015) as they seek to gain the positive outcomes of mindfulness for both individuals and the organization, for instance in terms of increased efficiency. This is what some may consider a problematic move away from spirituality of original Buddhist teachings that invites humans to avoid suffering and seek detachment from superficial material needs and wants altogether through meditation.

Mindfulness seems to address many important issues that employees and organizations in contemporary society are struggling with, such as information- and attention overload, constant distractions, multi-tasking and many other stressors resulting from the constant connectivity and complex work arrangements (Reb et al., 2020) that set the rhythm in our contemporary capitalistic society. Mindfulness training and consultancy is also now a rapidly growing \$1,2B industry in US only (Roche et al. 2020; Karjalainen et al., 2019). Large companies in the US like Google, Accenture, McKinsey, General Mills and many more (e.g., Shahbaz & Parker 2021) offer their employees tailored mindfulness training programs.

Mindfulness training programs as a field of study

Most empirical studies on mindfulness related training have been conducted since 2015, with a heavy reliance on the positivistic research paradigm (Johnson et al., 2020) and largely focus on questions of “impact” or the statistical influence of mindfulness programs on various well-being and performance related outcomes (Karjalainen et al., 2019, for recent reviews see for example Johnson et al., 2020; Eby et al., 2019 and Good et al., 2016). To summarize these outcome studies, a growing body of literature indicates a surprisingly consistent beneficial role of mindfulness to reduce common contemporary afflictions such as stress, emotional exhaustion

and psychological detachment, and to boost job-related outcomes such as work engagement, intrinsic motivation, creativity, prosocial behavior and conflict management (Reb et al., 2020).

However, these mostly survey-based cross-sectional studies largely ignore the complexity involved in learning mindfulness and the fact that mindfulness training programs in organizations are inevitably contextually embedded. They also ignore individual differences and participants own pre-understandings and life situations as they enter the program. An implicit assumption in the “impact research” is that employees are relatively homogeneous in their disposition to mindfulness training. The few qualitative studies that exist, however, show that there are subjective intentions and interpretations associated with the individuals’ engagement levels and that the adoption and integration of mindfulness training depends significantly on the individual, situation, and practice (Solhaug et al., 2016; Lyddy et al., 2016). There are methodological questions also with existing qualitative studies. These rely on data collected only upon completion of the programs that participants followed, missing on richness of in-depth, longitudinal methods. Hence, the existing body of literature seems to lack nuance and the overly positive outcomes need to be problematized.

Following Qui and Rooney (2017) and Langley (1999), we adopt a longitudinal research approach to empirically study a mindfulness training program as a learning process, acknowledging upfront that there are different phases in the program that may influence the level of participant engagement, and expecting that individuals’ experiences may differ and change over time for a variety of reasons.

The research problem and method

We deploy a phenomenographic approach to study how individual participants’ understandings evolve during a mindfulness training program to learn more about their trajectories and deepen our understanding of what people take with them to their work-and private lives after the program closes. Here, *understandings* refer to “people’s way of experiencing or making sense of their world” (Sandberg, 2000, p. 12) and is socially constructed and reconstructed through the person’s ongoing experiences and relationships with their world (Sandberg & Targama, 2007).

We set out to understand *how participants (‘leaders’) in an organizational mindfulness training program engage with the training and how their learning journeys can be understood*. Our ambition is to contribute to literature on mindfulness and mindfulness training applied to organization studies and leadership development. The idea that guides this research is to nuance the existing theorizing in this field through a greater understanding of individual learning journeys and processes as a group of people, a cohort, goes through a corporate mindfulness training program. Through individual interviews and participant diaries, we follow all the participants (12 in total) within one of the largest trade unions in Sweden who undertake an eight-week corporate mindfulness training program. All participants have managerial roles and are considered to be ‘leaders’ by their superiors.

Preliminary findings

Our research studies individual managers. However, in organizations, the effects of mindfulness practice are rarely purely individual (Reb et al., 2020) and mindfulness in the workplace is embedded in interpersonal interactions and relations embedded in organizational cultures, structures, processes and tasks, and operates in interaction with others (ibid).

From a first round of analysis, our preliminary findings indicate four types of trajectories that participants engage in. These are: 1) the transformational journey (“*I no longer want to work here and be a manager*”), 2) the relational journey (“*I take this training so I can be more ease with myself and be better at working with others*”), 3) the transactional journey (“*I need new tools to be more effective to pursue my career*”), and 4) the consumational journey (“*A little mindfulness is perhaps ok – but in my own terms*”). These early findings indicate varied learning journeys, only one of which (the relational journey) truly reaches out to relational effects that is the core purpose of leadership as an intersubjective phenomenon and a process of influence.

If we accept that management is a process of becoming opening up constant possibilities of both change and stability, then that becoming involves the way in which managers choose to respond to challenges in their environment. This experience involves observation and interpretation, trial and error – not from scientific or hierarchical distance but by themselves being the trial and error. Here, the practice of awareness, attention and remembering that are the core of the original concept of mindfulness, may become a relevant complement of reflexivity.

Applying the system view, and in view of learnings from Senge et al. (2005), our preliminary findings also indicate that five out of 12 participants (those who engage in the relational journey) in the mindfulness training program may reach at least some of the core capacity of *presence* needed to support making choices to serve the evolution of life.

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International Studying Leadership Conference: Copenhagen December 2023

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Abstract Title: Entangling Research and Development

Taking the theme of the ISLC Conference 2023, where leadership is viewed as: *a complex process of relational influence that enables interconnectivity and adaptability*, my PhD thesis explores the entangled processes of ethical leadership practice with voluntary sector practitioners, as part of Leadership Learning Clubs and the research process. Taking Barad (2007; p. 184) Agential Realism, where the processes and practices of ethical leadership are afforded agency through the entangling via intra-actions of the “human and non-human, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other socio-material practices”. Intra-actions are positioned by Barad as “boundary drawing practices – specific material (re)configurings of the world – which come to matter” (ibid, p. 140). Thus, the entangled processes of developing ethical leadership practice, are agential through intra-acting with ethical issues that are encountered as part of leadership. Entangling Research and Development, as a practice of ethical leadership explores how Keira, a voluntary sector practitioner became entangled with the research process, materialising as a practice of ethical leadership.

This paper focuses on the practices of ethical leadership, that materialise via a process of the entanglement of research and development. Embodied and intersubjective, the entangling of research and development materialises through being opened up to the entanglements of the researcher and researched through the blurring of roles, and the blurring of past-present-future of leadership development. Centred on Keira, a voluntary

sector practitioner, this paper explores how Keira developed an ethical leadership response through the taking of responsibility for her organisation's past associations with colonialism and racial exploitation, through the release of a press statement. Entangling research and development unfolded over a period of eighteen months, where Keira was able to approach the ethical issue through her own developing leadership practice via a process of entanglement with the Leadership Learning Club, the research process and with me as the researcher. Entangling research and development comprised of four dimensions: Recovering, Sustaining, Seeing Within, and Disentangling.

Recovering emerged through Keira's entanglement with her organisation's archives; recovering the voices of those that had been harmed by her organisation's associations with colonialism and racial exploitation. Recovering the voices of the past intra-acted with Keira's practice as an ethical stance that involved leading her organisation through a process of taking responsibility for its past, a marked departure from the position emerging from the organisation itself.

Sustaining emerged as an entanglement of both the sustaining of her ethical leadership response, and of being able to sustain her own health, wellbeing and financial security throughout the process leading up to the release of the press statement.

Seeing Within emerged through the entanglement of researcher and researched during interviews where Keira and I explored our own responses to ethical issues in the past, with Keira asking me to share my own experiences as a process of developing her own ethical leadership. Seeing Within involved a process of seeing an ethical issue for what it was; a recognition of being entangled but at the same time detached sufficiently to be able to see a situation with clarity and reflexivity, for what it was.

Disentangling marked Keira being able to disentangle herself from the previous three stages of recovering, sustaining and seeing within; disentangling in order to be able to see her own critical self-reflection that materialised: *maybe the question I was asking was back at me,*

what is it that makes you be able to carry on going, where does this sense of compulsion continue and you're carrying on using that, how do you do that?

In conclusion, Recovering, Sustaining, Seeing Within and Disentangling are the four dimensions of Entangling Research and Development, as a practice of ethical leadership that materialises through intense, embodied and relational intra-actions that play with and blur research and development, as a boundary-drawing practice through the exploration of the past-present-future of leadership development.

Proposed Workshop:

Contributors:

Kay Logan and Owain Smolovic Jones (confirmed)

Bigid Carroll and Jackie Ford (to be confirmed)

Title: Post-human Approaches to Studying Leadership Development

Outline: Half day workshop to explore and debate approaches to leadership development that emerge through the entanglement of the research process and leadership development.

Feeling the System

Relationality, Numbness, Trauma, and Ethical Restoration in Leadership

Abstract:

Proposal for paper and workshop at
The International Studying Leadership Conference 2023

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Word count: 750 (excluding references)

The purpose of the proposed paper is to highlight how resolving trauma and developing embodied capacities are imperative processes for leaders in our complex times. At the conference, practices like mindfulness and paired “witnessing” will be woven into the presentation to give participants a felt-sense experience of some of the proposed ideas.

We find ourselves in a “time between worlds” – an epoch in which the old paradigm is cracking and new horizons beckon from beyond (Stein, 2019). In such transformational times, leaders face the challenge of how to provide direction, clarity, and inspiration in a world that is falling apart.

Within the current paradigm, the go-to solution in such predicaments has been to improve logical reasoning capabilities and to accumulate more information. Epistemologically, so-called objective facts, data, and “irreducible brute matter” (Whitehead, 1967) have been prioritized. Expanding frontiers and achieving growth above all else has been the *modus operandi* in today’s materialist worldview (McGilchrist, 2021). A utilitarian ethics has followed, which,

exacerbated by technology, has positioned every choice as a means of achieving other instrumental ends (Schindler, 2018; Tyson, 2014).

Many are beginning to sense the limits of the prevailing paradigm. Crises ranging from mental health (Evans et al., 2018) and meaning (Vervaeke, Mastropietro, & Miscevic, 2017) to the overarching meta-crisis (Rowson, 2021) are making themselves known. Clearly, the ontologies and capacities that have us got us “here” won’t get us “there”. More effective and appropriate ways of being and knowing are called for in leadership and beyond.

Since the Enlightenment, concepts like “feeling” and “embodied” have been deemed to be irrelevant obstructions or subjective illusions (McGilchrist, 2021). However, thanks to developments in cognitive and complexity sciences, feelings are coming to be considered as prerequisites for effective action within complex adaptive systems. 4E cognitive science has demonstrated the inextricability of embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended capacities with cognitive reasoning (Newen, De Bruin, & Gallagher, 2018). Complexity experts describe emotions and feelings as “warm data” (Bateson, 2021) and the “dynamical patterns” (Hufendiek, 2016) that allow a system to be sensed from “within”, rather than talking “about” it from a distance (Bateson, 2021; Scharmer, 2009). Emotions are described as “forms of judgment” (Nussbaum, 2004) that open the possibility of “attending to the possible relational processes within [a] system and between that system and its “environment/s”” (Bateson, 2021). To respond more appropriately to the systems they are embedded within, leaders require capacities that allow them to sense and feel more of the embodied data at their disposal.

One of the most significant yet overlooked challenges in developing such feeling capacities is numbness. In traumatic situations of emotional and sensory overwhelm, the nervous system enters a shut-down state which curtails all but the most essential bodily functions (Porges, 2011). Depressed aliveness and numbness result, diluting the magnitude of otherwise unmanageable sensations (Hübl, 2020). The benefit is that the pain is numbed, but the cost is a separation from one’s body, feelings, and environment (Maté & Maté, 2022).

These traumatic responses are, perhaps despite appearances, applicable to leadership. Studies have shown that two-thirds of people report having been subject to at least one adverse or traumatic childhood experience (Dube et al., 2001; La Greca et al., 2008). Growing up in a society that systemically separates and neglects human needs has a traumatic effect in itself (Maté & Maté, 2022).

Leaders are molded within these environments as much as anyone else – and some studies suggest that leaders have been relatively overexposed to trauma in their lives (Gloria et al., 2022). In culmination, separation and numbness are part of programming under the hood of today’s organizations and leaders (Hübl, 2020).

Healing numbness and trauma is therefore a strategic leadership imperative. This process is one “healing through meeting” (Buber, 1923). As one’s wounded inner parts are met with precision and care, numbness and separation subside and increased feeling and connection ensue (Heller & LaPierre, 2012). One begins to feel and sense the nuances of relationality and the “entanglements of living” (Tsing, 2015) of the systems one is embedded within (Hübl, 2020; Scharmer, 2009). By “descending into the abyss” and “straightening oneself out” (Buber, 1923), leaders can move from separate, reductive, instrumental stances to more relational, inclusive, present modes of knowing and leading (McGilchrist, 2021). An ethical restoration takes place, as what was previously numb can be felt with emotional and moral weight (Hübl, 2020). Finally, in doing this inner work themselves, leaders develop the capacities to offer the same spaces of healing and transformation for others (Janni, 2022).

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Edited emotions: Are leaders' emotions authentic?

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Abstract

Helmuth et al (2022) recently raised a discussion on the subject of authentic leadership. Their approach to the debated concept of authenticity was to take an existential lens to the assessment of leaders' actions as authentic (Sartre) rather an assessment on the person. The debate is important, since the concept of authenticity as connected to charisma have a long history (Weber). In this paper, I present a study on how leaders interpret their role as outside of emotions. Obviously, leaders have emotions, but leaders understand emotions as an object that has to be edited. Particularly the study point to that the narratives leaders around themselves particularly do not allow for emotions such as crying and shame from humiliation.