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# Mindfulness and Leadership: Opening up to Possibilities

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# Articles from Integral Leadership Review

## Mindfulness and Leadership: Opening up to Possibilities

2011-11-01 10:11:58 Don Dunoon and Ellen Langer

Don Dunoon and Ellen Langer



Don Dunoon



Ellen Langer

A challenge for those of us who want to exercise leadership is to step beyond the obvious, to discern more broadly and keenly the factors bearing on an issue, to be more receptive to divergent perspectives and novel information, and to be more mindful. To be mindful is not simply to be a thoughtful, open-minded individual. Most of us think we are generally observant, open, and receptive to new information and ideas; but how true is this in specific instances? How attentive are we to what others are communicating? How well can we discern what is novel and unique in particular circumstances? To what degree are we alert to the perceptual filters, mindsets, and experiences we bring to the problems with which we deal? In our interactions with others, how adept are we in communicating so as to foster mutual understanding and learning?

Mindfulness has a dynamic quality. When we are mindful, we notice what is new or different in the particular context, whether in the external environment or in our own reactions and responses. We allow ourselves to openly receive different signals, including signals that are faint or at odds with our previous experience. The accent is on perceiving directly, without immediately analyzing, categorizing, or judging. Ideally, we are able to just notice and hold an observation and to stay with

uncertainty as to its meaning and significance. Noticing is not only characteristic of a mindful orientation, but noticing begets mindfulness. When we let ourselves take in new information and experience we are more likely to be grounded in the present, sensitive to context, aware of change and uncertainty, and attuned to possibility.

Mindfulness, as we use the term, refers not to particular spiritual, contemplative, or therapeutic traditions or practices. Our usage is grounded primarily in the Western scientific tradition and draws on 30 years of research by one of us (Langer) into mindfulness in a variety of settings. Our framing of leadership emphasizes in-the-moment interventions, whether by formal leaders or others, toward building shared understandings to enable change with contentious—messy—problems. This is a departure from established approaches that tend to be grounded in concerns about who exercises leadership and the relationships between the actors, whether in conventional leader-follower configurations or more contemporary variants.

Here we take three aspects of mindfulness and use them as lenses to consider leadership while focusing on actions to make headway with contentious problems. The three aspects are not clearly delineated categories; each flows into the other. They are different ways of looking at the same thing:

- Alertness to multiple perspectives;
- Active self-reappraisal; and
- Attentiveness to our use of language.

The concept of mindfulness can also help to reveal fresh perspectives on the subject of leadership itself. We suggest that the concept of leadership we describe is ordinarily mostly hidden from view by the dominance of conventional assumptions, such as that leaders and only leaders exercise leadership. In recognizing and lifting aside these assumptions—without necessarily rejecting them altogether—we may be able to catch glimpses of this different form. Mindfulness is in good measure about noticing and contemplating possibilities. This may lead to the possibility of a quite different form of leadership.

## **Alertness to Multiple Perspectives**

*The other directors just don't get it," says Michael, the treasurer of a metropolitan golf club. "Unless we change our financial strategy we'll almost certainly go under within 18 months. I've shown my co-directors the numbers time and again, but they don't want to face the realities. Usually I at least get some argument, but in the last meeting most of them just sat there in virtual silence. These people are timeservers. They've been on the board too long and they want to preserve the club as it was. What's weird is that they're successful business people.*

Sometimes our truth seems obvious and inescapable. Why can't others grasp it? What we see may well be true. The golf club could indeed be at risk of failing, but other realities might warrant consideration as well; such as what the other directors think, believe, and feel but are not declaring. When dealing with a problem, it can be

easy to assume that it can be understood from a single perspective—our own. Yet most issues, and especially those for which leadership is required, are contentious. These problems are seen differently by different stakeholders. There is more than one view; there is no single correct analysis or solution to be revealed. While the educated among us pay lip service to the idea that sensible alternative perspectives exist, the belief often goes by the wayside in any particular instance. It is as if we were saying, “After all, if I were wrong, I would change my mind.” By not *actively* considering alternatives, however, we keep ourselves blind to choices we might otherwise accept or incorporate into our existing views. We remain mindless and oblivious to being so. Thus, we are frequently in error but rarely in doubt.

Any contentious issue can be thought of as having an explicit, visible side and an implicit, hidden side. Think of an iceberg. The explicit side represents aspects of the problem that are observable or measurable. With the golf club issue, examples could include the club’s revenue and cost projections, trends in member numbers, behaviors that the directors and others demonstrate, and even the actual words they use. The hidden, below-the-waterline side of the problem represents latent mental resources that interested parties hold but for whatever reasons don’t speak to directly. The implicit side is the territory of unstated—possibly unconscious—assumptions, interests, feelings, and knowledge. It represents an immense source of potential intelligence for working through the problem.

In our golf club example, we might presume that each of the other directors—as seasoned business people—has relevant knowledge and experience to contribute to discussions of the club’s financial future. They may not have spoken up at the last meeting but there is potentially experience and insight to be tapped. Leadership work, from this perspective, entails drawing out and scrutinizing some of the group’s underlying intelligence and integrating it with the more tangible, above-the-waterline, resources relevant to the problem. A key aim of such leadership work is to help everyone involved gain a grounded understanding of both the issue as it presently exists as well as of a preferred future with it resolved. This is critical if the underlying aspects are to be dealt with and symptomatic fixes avoided. Working in this way to tap the hidden intelligence of the various stakeholders almost invariably implies dealing with disquiet and defensiveness. We are looking into and making explicit matters that people ordinarily tend to keep to themselves. A critical challenge, then, is to avoid unduly creating a threat and maintaining safety for ourselves and others.

One key is to allow ourselves to notice without immediately judging; to pay attention to what is directly observable and discernable in the situation as distinct from being an inference or drawing a conclusion. When we work from observation we are less likely to get caught up in making judgments that antagonize others. Furthermore, we reduce the risks of becoming captive to one line of analysis to the exclusion of different logics.

When we practice leadership mindfully we are able, in particular moments, to put the quality of our interactions ahead of task accomplishment. Part of what is implied here is to give the others involved our full attention. If we are to learn from them, we need to be present, attuned to what they are communicating to us—rather than

letting our thinking run ahead or focusing on particular strategies or actions we might want to put in place.

Of course, we do need to interpret; to make sense of what others are saying and doing. The challenge is to do this in a way that is mindful and allows possibilities to emerge. A critical element here is to assume that the others we are dealing with are capable of being reasonable. Their views will not make a lot of sense to us unless we actively try to switch perspectives and make them sensible. To the people concerned there probably is an underlying rationale, even if it has not been explicitly stated. If we assume unreasonableness, we in effect close off opportunities for learning from others.

Another key is in using questions to foster learning and understanding. When we are caught up in trying to pursue our own analyses and strategies, we are likely to use questions in a purely tactical sense, if at all. We might seek to confirm that others accept our analysis, or we might ask their opinion regarding a proposed solution. Asking questions to foster learning is a different approach. We frame our questions to connect with what we perceive is being communicated to us. This might involve clarifying or deepening our understanding of what others are saying—or even challenging their thinking. The key is being present with them. Our questions are geared to what they are saying or doing rather than attuned to pursuing our own line of analysis.

Actively working with multiple perspectives in the exercise of leadership poses special challenges for those in formal roles of authority. For instance, it can be easy to assume that others, including those in lower-ranked positions, will openly express what is on their minds regarding an issue. This is a risky assumption. People might, for example, be worried about upsetting or antagonizing the person with the greater, or more directly relevant, authority. Such concerns could lead them to hold back or soft-pedal relevant knowledge, feelings, and experience. When this happens, the person in authority potentially misses out on feedback and insights that might inform their thinking about directions and strategies—and he/she could be unaware that this restraint is occurring. To the extent that the authority figure senses that others are unconvinced about a proposed change, that individual may be prompted to step up their efforts at persuasion. This could in turn result in further suppression of relevant mental content.

Exercising leadership mindfully in working with multiple perspectives implies that we can choose what to observe and, as far as possible without judgment, put the quality of interaction as a higher priority than task achievement in particular instances, contemplate what might be real to a reasonable stakeholder, and ask questions to learn. We also allow that common defensive practices may make it difficult for people to speak up, particularly in hierarchical environments. When we exercise leadership in these ways, we may be surprised at how different perspectives on the problem can appear.

## **Active Self-Reappraisal**

Achieving shared and potentially creative understandings on an issue that concerns us requires at one level that we are open and responsive in particular moments to changes—however small or subtle—in the external environment. Equally important is that we are able to recognize and re-appraise our own perceptions and mindsets. We might like to think that we are open to self-reappraisal; but to what extent is this really the case? If our behavior makes sense to us, what would motivate us to reappraisal unless we believe that multiple truths may simultaneously exist?

Most of us, however, seek certainty. As a culture we suffer from an illusion of knowing. We have been led to believe that certainty exists, is comforting, and is the path to success. But certainty breeds mindlessness. Why notice if we already know? Things are always changing, however, and look different from different perspectives. When we are certain, we hold our perspective still and confuse the stability of our mindsets with the stability of the underlying phenomenon.

Our mindsets trip us up in other ways as well. We fail to recognize that our experiences condition us to see some things but not others. There is a self-reinforcing quality to this selective perception. When we search for information, we look for that which is consistent with our analytical approach and beliefs. We find what we expect to find. Contrary or unexpected information is frequently either not discerned or is rationalized away. One of the earliest demonstrations of this illusory correlation was a study we (Langer and Abelson, 1974) conducted in the early 1970s. Therapists saw a video of a person being interviewed. Half of those observing believed he was a job applicant; the other half believed he was a patient. Even these highly trained individuals were guided by their mindless expectations. Those viewing a “patient” saw a troubled person in need of therapy, while those viewing the same person thinking he was a job applicant saw him as well-adjusted. Essentially, we all see what we expect to see. When we mindfully loosen those expectations, we literally and figuratively see more.

Often we fail to take account of shifts in context. We uncritically apply experience learned in one situation without having regard to what is different or unique in the present circumstances. This may be because our expectations blind us to other possibilities, or because we are afraid of what change may bring, or because we are preoccupied with achieving our own objectives. Of course, achieving one’s objectives is a basic requirement for success in virtually any organization. Many pressures, such as deadlines and accountabilities, reinforce a focus on getting things done. Yet, if most of our energy goes into single-mindedly achieving our goals, we can restrict our ability to recognize and respond to the new, including fresh information from the external environment and different possibilities forming in our minds.

At times when goal attainment is a primary concern, we tend to frame problems as separate and disconnected from ourselves. We see the problem as “out there,” existing in isolation from the perceptions we have of it. It is likely that we regard others as causing the problem, as we are not acknowledging any personal connection with it. In these circumstances, we are prone to focus on strategies and solutions for overcoming the problem and to keep some of our thinking and analysis

under wraps. To declare our deeper thinking could be embarrassing inasmuch as we are contemplating actions or changes that are at least partly grounded in negative assessments of others. When we are concentrating on operating on the external environment, we can diminish our capacity for receptiveness and re-appraisal.

Here is Michael from the golf club again, talking about his interpretation of the club's problems and the strategy he has in mind:

*Some of my colleagues have argued that our main priority in managing the club's finances needs to be cost cutting. But this won't enable us to save the club now. We have slashed costs over several years. Further cuts would only damage the club's fabric. We need to increase our fees or put on a levy. The other board members can't see how critical the situation is. I overheard two of them saying after the last meeting that I was "fixated" on bringing in a fee increase. I thought that was interesting, especially as they didn't say anything in the meeting. I'm going to have to bring in a consultant to demonstrate to them why a fee increase or levy is necessary.*

If others perceive us as fixed on a particular analysis or objective, or as guarded in what we say, they will probably be wary in what they communicate to us. The deep sharing of ideas and experience essential to building common understandings as a basis for enabling change on a contentious issue is unlikely to occur. The prospects are slim for new insights and fresh understandings. Blame and self-justification are more likely outcomes. Although we might function as if this were not the case, we invariably bring a rich array of assumptions, interests, feelings, and knowledge to the issues with which we are engaged. When we are mindful we notice, rather than judge harshly or accept uncritically, our own thoughts and feelings relevant to the issue. We still need to be actively focused on task accomplishment; but in particular moments we are also prepared to take a second look at our own thinking and to step outside our particular framing of the issue.

Michael was alert to the comments by the other board members about his being fixated on a fee or revenue increase. His own remark, in telling the story about the comments being "interesting," suggested he may also be aware of a shift in context here: that whereas he says he usually gets "some argument," in the most recent meeting most members sat there "in virtual silence." A challenge for Michael is to hold these perceptions in his awareness; to reflect not only on what the other directors might have been thinking but also on his own relevant thoughts and feelings, such as what he has been taking for granted with this problem, what he values in relation to it, what emotions he is experiencing, and what pertinent knowledge he holds but has not declared.

If Michael is able to contemplate the perspectives he brings to the issue, he may come to see that he is making assumptions such that there is no scope for cost reductions and that a fee increase will be acceptable to members. He might become clearer about what is important to him in this instance, such as ensuring the club's survival while not jeopardizing its essential resources; as well as about

what he is feeling, presumably including frustration that the other directors don't see the problem as he does. With some reflection on his own stance, Michael might discover that just as some of the other directors see him as "fixated" on the question of a fee increase, he is regarding other directors as preoccupied with costs and/or as incapable of engaging with the club's financial plight. Perhaps the issues have as much to do with the processes of interaction between the directors as with the substantive differences in their respective approaches to this issue.

Whenever we seek to exercise leadership mindfully with dealing with a contentious issue, a challenge is to be able to frame the problems at hand in ways that others can connect with the problems. This implies stepping aside from our own assessment and trying to see the issues as might someone who was looking in from the outside. Working in this way is difficult, but it can be done. When we succeed in stepping back from our own framing, we potentially open up possibilities for seeing the issues anew. We stand to give ourselves greater space to entertain complexity and to view the problem more holistically—with our own mental constructs as part of the equation. Regarding ourselves as actors rather than just as observers of the actions of others can help us to move away from externalizing responsibility and toward joint exploration. Prospective benefits include more intelligence applied to the problem and deeper, more nuanced, and more genuinely shared understandings about present realities and preferred futures.

Undertaking this work implies being prepared to engage in difficult conversations. Difficult communication is difficult mainly because we are afraid of being criticized or of looking foolish. Once we recognize that the actor's behavior makes sense from her perspective or else she wouldn't do it or think it, evaluation and fear of evaluation usually dissipates. Like so much else in leadership, making headway is largely a matter of how we communicate and, in particular, of how we use language.

## **Attentiveness to Our Use of Language**

Communication, particularly spoken communication, is central to most leadership frameworks. Typically the accent is on a leader communicating a vision to engage and enlist others or to enthuse and inspire them toward achieving the vision. The language called for tends to be that of persuading, coaxing, and inducing people to commit to a particular direction. The use of stories, metaphors, and appeals to emotion are commonly emphasized.

We don't reject outright such conventional approaches to thinking about leadership communication; we simply find them constraining. Here we describe three inter-related aspects of language use that we see as reflecting and supporting mindful leadership practice:

- Using language descriptively rather than judgmentally;
- Favoring conditional over absolute language; and
- Seeking to disclose some of what has been hidden, unspoken for us concerning the issue at hand.



## ***Using language descriptively rather than judgmentally***

To describe, in this context, is to speak to what we notice at particular points while refraining from judgment and holding our observations as open to response by others. We recognize that we may be discerning some things while others may be taking in different signals. Or others may notice much the same things as us but interpret them differently. The more we can differentiate what we observe directly from inferences and interpretations we make about our observations, the more we are potentially alert to the possibility of multiple perspectives.

We are likely to be in a judgmental frame of mind when we find ourselves relying on generalizations, stereotypes, and negative attributes of others. These forms of categorization might seem warranted for depicting reality in particular circumstances, but are we over-simplifying? Sweeping assessments, particularly negative ones, can be a convenient way of pushing aside experience or evidence that doesn't fit with our preferred analysis.

In the golf club story, Michael noticed that at the most recent meeting some other directors, who are experienced business people, said very little. He attributed this in part to them being "time-servers, on the board too long." If Michael were to declare this negative attribution to the board members, it is highly probable they would react defensively. An attribution like this is essentially untestable; and, as such—from the perspective of mindful leadership practice—is probably better let go. To be more mindful Michael could say something like, "I noticed that at the last meeting you didn't say much and that puzzled me, given that you are experienced business people. I wonder whether you share the assessment that you were quiet. If you agree, perhaps you could let me know some of your thinking as to what was going on for you?"

It is true that to speak in this way might make one feel threatened and vulnerable. Yet a level of safety for ourselves and others can be established by steering clear of adverse judgments, attributing to others the capacity for being reasonable in the particular circumstances, and speaking truly to what we discern directly. None of this is easy; yet it is possible if we make conscious choices to work in this way, and we persevere in our practice.

## ***Favoring conditional over absolute language***

Related to the idea of preferring descriptive over evaluative language is to speak in ways that are conditional or provisional rather than in absolutes. Expressions such as "in my view," "what I notice is," and "it seems to me" remind us that there are contending viewpoints. When we use absolute language, such as "this is the problem or" "they don't get it," we can fall prey to an illusion that the problem has a single analysis and path to resolution. On the other hand, conditional language helps prompt us to recognize ourselves as seeing part of the picture rather than having privileged access to an understanding of the whole.

Some might think the use of conditional language implies weakness or indecision.

That might be the case if we equate leadership with authority and executive decision-making, as no doubt some do. But recognizing in our speech the subjectivity of our viewpoints need not require that we surrender our own analysis and thoughts. Instead, we avoid holding our views too tightly; we put them forward confidently but stop short of certainty. To be able to do so, in our view, signifies strength in the practice of leadership.

### ***Seeking to disclose some of what has been hidden, implicit for us***

Disclosing in this context is a matter of voicing some of the pertinent content from our own implicit domain: assumptions, interests, feelings, or knowledge that we are aware of in our minds, or partly aware of, but have not spoken to directly or fully. This deep-reaching content, insofar as we can express it, potentially provides a valuable addition to the mental resources available for building shared meaning with a contentious issue. There is also a very practical reason for disclosing. If we seek to inquire into the realities that others see but hold back on our personal contributions, we might be seen by those involved as trying to manipulate them.

When we disclose mindfully, we describe our relevant thoughts and feelings and perhaps offer some insights into the basis of these. In speaking up, we are simply sharing—without adverse judgments about others and without undue self-justification—to inform the conversation.

It can be hard enough to recognize and sort through our implicit assumptions, interests, feelings and knowledge. But expressing these to others makes for additional challenges. Will the things I say be misunderstood? Will my disclosures be used against me? What if I say too much? How will others react? What might that mean for me? A level of disclosing is crucial to mindful leadership practice. It is a visible representation of our recognizing a personal connection to the problem. The act of disclosing can put us in an uncomfortable place; yet without such efforts to speak up, we may find the changes we wish to see remain frustratingly out of reach.

## **Mindfulness and the Subject of Leadership**

Until now our concern has been primarily with mindful leadership practice at the level of the individual. We have suggested that becoming more mindful in our practice can help us to see problems more holistically and to speak with others in ways that can yield fresh, fuller, and more deeply shared understandings. Now we are about to pull the lens right back. We are shifting our attention to consider mindfulness and leadership at a more abstract level. Our focus in this section is on applying mindfulness concepts to the subject of leadership itself, with the aim of pointing to a fresh means of access for thinking about it.

With the vast array of leadership resources in existence, there is—at one level—diversity in abundance. Yet, much of this material seems to share an underlying theme. The accent—implicitly at least—tends to be on questions relating to *who* actually exercises leadership, as well as on where the players are located in terms

of organizational role and context, and on the relationships and dynamics between them. In contrast, the nature of the leadership work being undertaken is often given relatively little attention.

Traditionally—as would be obvious to anyone with an interest in the field—leaders, usually people in positions of authority, have been at the center of most writing about leadership. This intertwining of leadership and leaders is so pervasive that the terms are often used as if they were interchangeable: “The leaders are meeting today.” “The leadership group is meeting today.” We can also see this equating of leadership with leaders in “leadership capability” frameworks. Many—perhaps most—of these could more accurately be said to describe desired leader *capabilities*.

The continued binding together of the terms leadership and leaders is hardly surprising. The combined efforts of a plethora of researchers, business schools, leadership development programs, instrument providers—as well as the media—tend to perpetuate deeply held cultural assumptions that leadership is exercised by leaders alone, and leadership is necessarily what leaders do. Of course, leaders need to exercise leadership. We have no argument there. But to effectively equate leadership and leaders seems to us not very mindful. When we conflate the two terms in this way, we risk presuming that the only thing leaders do is leadership (leaving out things like management or executive decision-making) and that only leaders can exercise or contribute to leadership. We stand to miss out on much of the intelligence that others, who do not occupy elevated roles or who do not attract or comfortably wear the label of leader, can bring to making sense of, and enabling change with, contentious problems. Allowing that others can add to leadership action does not diminish the leadership contribution of leaders; it just re-contextualizes it.

To be more mindful in using the terms leadership and leaders implies actively recognizing that they are overlapping yet also distinct. This is a matter of consciously exercising choice in our use of language. Most of us know that our selection of words can matter. We avoid using terms that perpetuate prejudicial attitudes toward groups in society. While mixing together the words leadership and leaders might not obviously cause anyone harm, doing so can blind us to other possible ways of comprehending leadership.

It is true that over the past decade or more many leadership scholars and authors have attempted to move away from the conventional leader-centeredness of the leadership literature. The direction has been largely toward including others under the leadership umbrella, including people sharing executive roles and taking on responsibilities for particular functions. Often, there is recognition that leaders cannot do it all themselves and that the particular strengths and expertise others bring can add value to leaders’ contributions. In some schemas, the focus is primarily on the group as enacting leadership. In these, the stepping away from the individual leader becomes virtually complete.

Frameworks that seek to de-center the leader are presented variously under banners including distributed, shared, collaborative, and collective leadership. These terms are used in an assortment of ways. Even allowing for great variation in the

frameworks, we think a question that needs to be asked is: How much of a move away from conventional constructs do these approaches actually represent? The spotlight on the individual leader may have been turned down, but our impression is that there remains at least an undercurrent of concern with pinning leadership to people or groups, however disparate such groups may be.

Take the notion of distributed leadership, for example—a topic on which there is now quite a developed literature, particularly in the education sector. To us the term “distributed” implies, or at least suggests, some things about the nature of the leadership under consideration. One is that leadership has primarily to do with roles and responsibilities that someone in an executive role distributes, parcels out, or allocates. Admittedly, it may be that the initiative comes from the other direction and people further down the hierarchy step up to take on particular responsibilities. Yet some level of endorsement by formal leaders is still implied in the term distributed.

Essentially, the problem as we see it stems from the conflating of leaders and leadership mentioned earlier. Instead of leadership referring to the topmost roles, now it is broadened to include other actors. Leadership is still attached to people; the only change is that more people are included in the role of leader. There is nothing in the expression “distributed leadership” that implies the kind of in-the-moment building of shared meaning with contentious issues that we see as being pivotal to the practice of leadership.

Let’s now briefly consider another emerging term in the leadership literature: collective leadership. Whereas the term distributed leadership suggests a backing away from putting the leader at the center of leadership, collective leadership—at least in some forms—can represent a full scale retreat from highlighting the leader. From this perspective leadership is centered in group and organizational processes as members endeavor to make sense of the situations they find themselves in and take action.

The danger we see is that the desire to counteract the traditional emphasis on the individual leader can lead to a rejection of anything that smacks of individual contribution. Leadership can come to be framed in binary terms as a matter of group or individual effort. As we see it, mindful leadership practice implies both individual and collective components. Our emphasis is on in-the-moment interventions by individuals contributing to the building of shared meaning in a group about a contentious problem. Those interventions can come from any, or multiple, contributors. Formal leaders do contribute significantly in enacting leadership; but so do other people, and not just in a conventional leader-follower formulation. It is an open question as to where actual interventions originate when working through a particular issue.

If we were to start from conventional concerns—expressed or implied—as to who undertakes leadership, we would be unlikely to end up with the kind of hybrid approach we are proposing, with both individual and collective components. To say both individual and collective contributions is not a neat, satisfying resolution to the question of “who.”

## Perhaps What Is Needed Is a Different Question

In drawing our attention to possibilities, mindfulness implies that we consider the extent to which we could be acting in order to direct our attention toward only some facets of an issue to the exclusion of others. Here we might ask whether an overarching concern with questions concerning the people and relationships involved in the exercise of leadership is in effect masking, shielding from view, a possibly equally important but rarely glimpsed means of understanding the topic. The alternative way that potentially opens up this different form is not to begin with questions about the “who” of leadership and associated matters, but with the “what for.” What is the purpose of leadership? What is it for? What difference can it make?

Obviously, the purpose of leadership can be defined in different ways: to enable change, to point people in a desired direction, or to modify behavior. Our own framing emphasizes the core purpose of leadership as having to do with building shared meaning for the purpose of enabling change to deal with contentious problems. It may be possible to muddle along and achieve some degree of shift with a contentious problem through applying strategies and fixes; in effect, through managing the problem. But making substantial headway requires leadership.

Whichever way its purpose is defined, we contend that leadership always involves engaging with contentious problems, whether or not the contention is recognized. When a leader seeks to motivate others toward a vision, contention is implied; inasmuch as some people presumably have different ideas as to what is required. When members of a group are said to be resisting a needed change, we can again presume differences of view—albeit possibly unsurfaced.

Our aim here is not to dispatch other frames for understanding leadership, though obviously we are offering a degree of broad critique. Our prime concern is to expand the study of leadership; to open up space for considering leadership from a standpoint that starts from considerations of the purpose of leadership rather than from concerns about people, roles, or relationships.

Beginning with the proposition that leadership almost always implies engaging with contentious problems to bring forth change, we put forward a number of further propositions that, in effect, bring together—and in some ways extend—the main themes we have explored here. We contend that mindful leadership practice implies the importance of:

- Drawing on both explicit and implicit aspects about current realities and preferred futures to build shared understanding regarding a contentious problem
- Engaging the hidden intelligence available in various stakeholders in order to understand and make sense of multiple perspectives
- Working to eliminate perverse patterns and practices of defensive behaviors that arise in efforts to elicit hidden intelligence, being aware that we also have these defensive patterns and practices
- Eliciting contributions to leadership action from any individual or group with an

interest in the issue at hand

- Being aware that those seeking to exercise leadership can never have a monopoly on relevant knowledge and that they bring their own partly or fully unconscious beliefs, interests, values, and assumptions to issues
- Elevating the quality of the interaction above concerns for task achievement in particular moments
- Accenting deep listening—noticing without a rush to conclusion, contemplating other perspectives while presuming reasonableness, inquiring into implicit aspects, speaking up in ways that emphasize description and conditional language including elements of personal disclosure, and framing understandings of current realities and desired futures that can be held out for testing with others
- Releasing energy for change by enabling intrinsic motivation in all people rather than looking to a leader to motivate and enthuse
- Observing, reflecting, practicing, and asking the right questions in order to develop proficiency in this form of leadership. Rather than asking, “Am I a good leader?” a key question is, “How well am I intervening with the issues that concern me?”
- Holding the terms leader and leadership mindfully as overlapping but distinct constructs. While the work of leadership in establishing shared meaning for change potentially has individual and collective components, the role of making decisions as to ways forward often rests with an individual formal leader.

We have suggested – particularly through the golf club story – that conceiving of leadership in terms of building shared meaning to enable change with contentious problems has practical as well as more theoretical implications. Imagine that Michael at the golf club is able to be more in-the-moment in his interactions with the other directors, open to their views as to the club’s financial problems, and capable of recognizing and holding out some of his own germane thoughts and feelings in ways that invite response. If so, he may be better able to work with the directors to get to a common appreciation of the nature of the issues facing the club and of the shift that is necessary to achieve. If he and the others can get that far, they may stand a much better chance of putting into place strategies to turn the situation around.

Similarly, those of us interested in the study and practice of leadership may find we make much greater headway if we are able to broaden our appreciation of possible avenues for approaching leadership. It is a step in this direction even to just hold out and examine the prospect of leadership as being grounded in action to enable change with contentious problems. Such openness to possibility is the crux of mindfulness in thinking about, and practicing, leadership.

## Notes

For an outline of mindfulness in the context of therapeutic practices see the article by Rosaria (Ria) Hawkins, “Mindfulness Matters” in the June 2011 edition of *Integral Leadership Review*.

The notion of multiple perspectives was introduced in Ellen Langer's book *Mindfulness*, (1989 Addison-Wesley: Reading MA) as "More than one view," Chapter 5, pp. 68–72. Ideas informing the "Active self-reappraisal" section were discussed in *Mindfulness* under the headings, "Creating new categories" (pp. 63–66) and "Welcoming new information" (pp. 66–68).

The research findings on therapists assessing a person as a "patient" or job applicant are presented in: Langer, E and Abelson, R 1974 "A patient by any other name...: Clinician group differences in labeling bias," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 42: 4-9.

For more on "Attention to use of language" see Ellen Langer's *Counterclockwise* (2009 Ballantine: New York) esp. Ch. 6, pp. 97–99. See also Don Dunoon's *In the Leadership Mode* (2008 Trafford: Victoria BC) esp. Ch. 9.

As an example of a conventional leadership formulation emphasizing a leader communicating to engage and inspire others, see Kouzes, JM and Posner, BZ 2002 *The Leadership Challenge, Third Edition*, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

For a discussion of assumptions implicit in conventional framings of leadership, see Don Dunoon's *In the Leadership Mode*, especially Ch. 1. Leadership as involving in-the-moment interventions to help build shared meaning to enable change with contentious problems is discussed in Ch. 2 (and subsequent chapters).

As to the tendency, mentioned in the concluding section, to conflate the terms leadership and leaders, Joseph Rost in *Leadership for the Twenty First Century* (1991 Praeger: Westport, Connecticut) reviewed the pattern of development of leadership theories over the decades. A tendency he noticed was for leadership scholars to fail to differentiate the terms "leadership" and "leader." (See pp. 27, 43-44, 58, 134)

Sources emphasizing more collectively-oriented approaches to leadership include: Raelin J 2011 "From leadership-as-practice to leaderful practice" *Leadership* 7(2) 195-211; and, Crevani, L Lindgren, M and Packendorff J 2010 "Leadership, not leaders: On the study of leadership as practices and interactions" *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 26 77-86.

In the final section we referred to "managing" a problem as being different to undertaking leadership. The leadership-management relationship is discussed in Ch. 4 of Don Dunoon's *In the Leadership Mode*. Both leadership and management-oriented actions can be taken with contentious problems. We act in the "management mode" in particular moments when we focus our attention on the explicit, tangible aspects of a problem, when we give priority to task achievement over building deeply-shared understandings, and when we act with legitimacy deriving from the authority (positional or otherwise) that we bring to the situation.

The case story involving Michael and the golf club was introduced in Don Dunoon's *In the Leadership Mode* (Ch. 9).

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## About the Authors

**Don Dunoon** is the author of *In the Leadership Mode* (Trafford, 2008), a book that, instead of attaching leadership to people and groups, frames leadership in terms of interventions to build shared meaning for change with contentious – messy – problems. As a consultant with over 20 years' experience and based in Sydney, Australia, Dunoon specializes in helping organizations, groups, and individuals develop their capabilities in dealing productively with contentious problems. A regular presenter at international conferences, he has an M Com (Hons) degree from the University of New South Wales, and has contributed to post-graduate teaching at that University. [ddunoon@newfutures.com.au](mailto:ddunoon@newfutures.com.au), [www.dondunoon.com](http://www.dondunoon.com)

**Ellen Langer**, PhD from Yale, Harvard Professor of Psychology, artist, recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and three Distinguished Scientist Awards has authored eleven books and over 200 research articles on topics such as perceived control, aging, learning and decision-making. Each of these is examined through the lens of her theory of mindfulness. Her research has demonstrated that by actively noticing new things – the essence of mindfulness – health, well being, and competence will follow. Her best-selling books include *Mindfulness; The Power of Mindful Learning; On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Creativity* and her most recent book, *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*.

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