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Leading Authentically – Overcoming the ‘Mind-Boggling’ Consequences of Mindless Leadership

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The extent of fake leadership and management behaviour in business and society is mind-boggling as indicated by the large number of corporate non-compliance cases and trust violations. Examples include the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the damaged reputation of UK-based pharmaceuticals giant GlaxoSmithKline as a consequence of a bribery case in China or the recent class action lawsuit related to price-fixing of tickets for trans-Pacific flights.

In this article, we posit that mindfulness defined as present moment-awareness in combination with authentic leadership behaviour might be a cure to prevent more of such leadership crises from happening in the future. In its final stage, mindfulness refers to a sort of enlightened state of being in which greed, hatred and delusion have been overcome, and are absent from the mind. In the context of everyday leadership behaviour, this might imply the necessity of staying aware of one’s responsibilities, for example, by paying close attention to situational requirements as well as concerns and needs of one’s followers. Mindfulness without high standards for moral conduct is like a failed rocket launch. To make a case for mindfulness, let us revisit what leaders do and what they should not do.

According to leadership wisdom accumulated in the ever growing leadership literature, ‘good’ leaders change the status quo for the common good (which requires initiative and courage); they influence people and provide an environment to achieve team or organisational objectives; and they (ideally) exercise ethical, values-based leadership in the pursuit of economic and societal progress as well as sustainable development. The flip side in terms of real ‘bad’ leadership is perhaps best embodied in the fictional character Gordon Gecko portrayed by Michael Douglas in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. The 2007-2008 financial crisis illustrates the negative socio-economic consequences of an unrestrained greed market. Who then are ‘good’ leaders and what defines them?

One outstanding leadership expert in search of ‘positive’ leadership is Professor Bruce Avolio. He and his team has developed several diagnostic leadership development tools such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (45 descriptive statements) which assesses a full range of leadership behaviours related to the concepts of transformational and transactional leadership as well as passive/avoidant leadership and outcomes. Transformational leadership in particular is the holy grail of effective leadership because of the potentially beneficial impact of required competencies (which are not always in sufficient supply in organisations) on stakeholders such as ‘idealised attributes and behaviours’ (influence), ‘inspirational motivation’, ‘intellectual stimulation’ and ‘individualised consideration’ and outcomes. Related questions every leader should ask are: Am I a role model for my followers and am I able to inspire others to follow?

Can I motivate others to commit to the vision? Do I encourage innovation and creativity? Do I coach my followers (and bosses) in line with my/our/their needs?

In one of his papers entitled 'Pursuing Authentic Leadership Development' in which he reflects about the evolution of the authentic leadership paradigm (the apex of transformational leadership so to speak), Avolio introduces the reader to Sam, a supervisor in a US prison workshop where he did some research: "As I reflect back on Sam, he was unfailingly humble, genuine, compassionate, ethical, inspiring to a large cadre of inmates, and willing to challenge the core assumption that most inmates end up failing to do—there is a better life than crime. Sam was a transformational leader in every sense, and more importantly he was authentic". It is this humble transformational authenticity in combination with mindfulness which I find most inspiring when it comes to exemplifying really positive leadership behaviour in reflective leadership sessions with young high potentials because these traits are so critical and yet so rare in the corporate world.

Conceptually speaking, authentic (genuine) leaders are true to their own personality, spirit and character. They do not wear several masks and ensure that their true personality shines through both at work and outside of work. With their clear moral center, self-awareness and high sense of ethics, they are (perceived as) fair, balanced in their decision-making approach and mission-driven. They lead with their heart and focus on the long-term. Mindful leaders know when to pause and listen; they show respect and are supportive.

As Bill George, Professor of Management Practice at the Harvard Business School and former chairman and CEO of Medtronic has put it, 'people know who is authentic and who is not'. Medtronic is a successful global medical technology company whose market capitalisation grew to US\$60 billion from US\$1.1 billion under George's watch). Authentic leaders have stable and coherent self-concepts. They are motivated by a larger purpose (than their ego) and willing to make decisions which are 'right'. They are not coercive to associates but able to rationally persuade them. Through their authentic values, beliefs, and behaviour, they represent role models for the development of associates (and help to transform / develop them into leaders themselves). They solicit feedback for improving dealings with others, are clearly aware of the impact they have on others and admit mistakes when they. Inauthentic leaders in contrast ask 'what's in for me'? They don't see the need to reflect on their own personal limitations, are not always candid about their failures and often not in touch with their own emotions.

The way towards truly authentic leadership behaviour is long and stony. Besides high standards for moral conduct, authentic leadership apprentices must be willing to invest substantial time and effort into self awareness work in order to accumulate sufficient self knowledge and to be aware of one's strengths cum weaknesses (e.g. with the help of diagnostic tools such as the StrengthsFinder, reflected best self exercises or through the eyes of their own followers during a frank coaching session). They need to be open towards and engage in guided self development aimed at transitioning from one's actual self to one's

possible self. The ultimate goal is to become ‘the best person you can possibly be’. Regular feedback, formal workshop training, journaling, reflections about one’s own leadership (‘crucibles’) moments and defining past experiences, learning from adversity, observational learning or role modelling represent other useful tools. Where do we start?

Identifying and working with a trusted coach is a workable approach. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) defines coaching as “developing a person’s skills and knowledge so that their job performance improves, hopefully leading to the achievement of organisational objectives. It targets high performance and improvement at work, although it may also have an impact on an individual’s private life”. In the context of leadership, coaching provides both aspiring and experienced leaders with feedback on their strengths and their limitations. Since it is a skilled activity, leadership coaching should be delivered by people competent in both coaching and leadership matters. Effective coaching can help leaders to (i) think big and innovatively so that they are able to lead innovation efforts, (ii) improve the way they relate to others so that they learn to let go and trust others, (iii) explore new ways of being with the effect of finding their true self and (iv) inspire others by creating a shared purpose so that they know the difference they want to make. ‘Even’ Steve Jobs had coaching support: Intuit chairman Bill Campbell.

In reality, however, there are numerous problems which make it very difficult to leverage on coaching advice such as leaders’ unwillingness to open up, perceptual blindness or the existence of mind traps such as one’s own image as the selfless (“I have to do my duty”) martyr leader who takes on too much and becomes resentful due to coping problems. Coming to terms with the perceptual forces and often negative emotions behind such traps, e.g. by taking a deep breath and being truthful about the situation, is critical in ‘getting out of the box’ and to make a conscious choice about what to do next by looking objectively at one’s options. Such options figure prominently in the so-called GROW coaching model. During the first stage, coach and coachee need to figure out what the end point or final expected outcome (the Goal) to be achieved via the coaching engagement might be (e.g. to resolve a conflict a coachee might have with a colleague). Secondly, the coach needs to motivate the coachee to describe the current Reality, including issues and potential (perceptual) barriers and what has been tried with whom, when, how etc, and with what effect (acting out the role of one’s ‘enemy’ and stepping into that person’s shoes during a dialogue with the coach may help to see things differently). Once the current issues and obstacles have surfaced and are understood, the coachee’s Options to deal with them need to be discussed as well as related benefits and possible downsides. Finally, the coach must motivate the coachee to hold himself/herself accountable to commit to specific actions and follow-up measures (the Will).

Present moment-awareness together with clear comprehension of what is taking place here and now can help to untrap one’s mind. Mindfulness requires non-judgmental, focused attention, a skill which can be acquired. Pausing in the midst of a hectic day, sitting silently and observing one’s breath (and thoughts) or identifying one’s fears, priorities, values etc. once one’s ego has quieted are proven ways to become more mindful. A quiet ego can help to cope with ego threat so as to become less defensive and to manage difficult conversations with both directness and empathy.

The power of mindful leadership becomes more obvious if we contrast it with less-mindful (or ‘mindless’) leadership. Symptoms may include not paying attention to or not having awareness of the activities one is engaged in, including the internal states and processes (emotions) one is experiencing. Less mindful leaders often only pay partial attention to the people they come in contact with. As a result they might be perceived as disrespectful, incompetent and aloof.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Less stress and anxiety

Better mood and increased well being

Improved concentration and memory

Accepting reality

Being in control of one’s thoughts

Focused (present) attention

Internal awareness

External awareness

Lack of absentmindedness

More empathy, patience and kindness

(Source: Chay et al, 2014)[1] In search of “Asian” conceptions of leadership with a focus on mindfulness. In: Thomas Menkhoff, Chay Yue Wah, Hans-Dieter Evers and Hoon Chang Yau (eds.), Catalysts for Change – Chinese Business in Asia. World Scientific Publishing

The world of high performance sports provides us with some inspiring role models of successful leaders such as the legendary US basketball coach Phil Jackson (Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers) who had been groomed to become a minister in line with his family’s tradition but found his true self in sports. Contrary to tai chi or yoga which did not “stick” with his players, his players were receptive to his mindfulness trainings, e.g. via meditation and stillness practice. In his books and interviews, Phil Jackson has revealed some of his powerful training and team-building principles such as ‘One Breath – One Mind’ or ‘No Man Goes His Way Alone’ aimed at building up the mental strength of his coaches through mindfulness or to manage the god-like aura around star player Michael Jordan so as to create space for other team members. His comments underline his own deep authenticity, a key enabler of his success as coach.

“You have to be able to psychologically help your players, support-wise, be in touch with them, so I think managing people is very important” (Phil Jackson).

The advice coaching experts give to coachees receiving feedback is similar to what followers would expect from a “collaborative” leader: the ability to listen to feedback without any interruption and with the intent of learning something new; not being defensive; summarising what was communicated or discussing how one can improve and the way forward. Likewise good practices of giving effective coaching feedback resemble what leaders are supposed to do when they engage their followers: the ability to focus one’s (constructive, factual and specific) feedback on behaviour, not the person or to concentrate on behaviour the subordinate can realistically change. However, contrary to the world of sports, in the world of business mindless, inauthentic leadership is still very widespread. The fact that former BP CEO Tony Hayward took time off to go sailing with his son during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill (for which he was heavily criticised) or corporate group think where the desire for conformity and a wrong sense of loyalty together with the illusion of invulnerability can lead to unethical decision-making outcomes such as bribery might be interpreted in this fashion.

Media reports about ongoing leadership failures in business and society suggest that absentmindedness in combination with insufficient attention and (internal & external) awareness can derail leaders. Regular mindfulness activities such as slowing down, concentrated (reflective) breathing techniques in support of honest sharing sessions with a focus on deciphering important lessons learnt during challenging leadership moments (e.g. with regard to inauthentic or insufficiently mindful leadership behaviour) guided by a good coach can be very useful in achieving mindfulness mastery. Mindfulness can also help to manage undesirable distractions, reduce stress and improve one’s immune system. In sum, mindfulness appears to be a critical trait of leaders in East and West and a key resource to become a master of morally unimpeachable, positive leadership.