



# Be(com)ing other-oriented: Mindfulness-trained leaders' experiences of their enhanced social awareness

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## Abstract

The potential significance of mindfulness for social relations at work has been recognized in the recent management literature, yet a thorough investigation has been lacking into how mindfulness may help leaders tap into their other-orientation. In this study, we examine whether and how mindfulness training contributes to the development of leaders' social awareness by studying the experiences of 62 leaders who participated in an 8-week-long mindfulness training program. Our study contributes to the literature on management learning and mindfulness in leadership in three ways. First, it identifies how the leaders who participated in mindfulness training see themselves developing toward becoming more socially aware in situations involving followers across the three interlinked domains of human functioning—the cognitive, affective, and behavioral—clarifying mindfulness as an interpersonal phenomenon. Second, it highlights mindfulness as a value-based developmental practice instead of merely a personal stress reduction and attention-enhancement technique. Third, it proposes mindfulness training as a viable approach to enhance leaders' social awareness through a combination of a formal program and continuous self-development, departing from the views of mindfulness as a “quick fix.” It also provides a conceptual framework that illustrates the pathway with the potential to build social leadership capacity.

## Keywords

Leadership, leadership development, management learning, mindfulness intervention, mindfulness training, social relations

*To meditate means to go home to yourself. Then you know how to take care of the things that are happening inside you, and you know how to take care of the things that happen around you.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh

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The potential significance of mindfulness, “the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present” (Brown and Ryan, 2003: 822), for social relations at work has been recognized in the recent management literature (e.g. Eby et al., 2020; Kay and Young, 2022; Reina et al., 2022; Rooney et al., 2021; Vu and Nguyen, 2022). A leader’s presence to and awareness of others in social situations, *social awareness*, is a critical contributor to the individual leader’s *social leadership capacity*, the capacity to be an effective leader in social situations involving followers (Dane and Rockmann, 2020; Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017). Social awareness is an other-oriented form of awareness that may be conceptualized in relation to other people and in terms of *social* and *emotional intelligence* (Goleman, 1995; Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Svalgaard, 2018; Thorndike, 1920; for a review, see Carden et al., 2021), all of which are important components of mindfulness. Learning to be fully present to followers may help leaders better understand the followers’ needs and the value of being supportive and thus support their followers’ well-being and performance (Reb et al., 2014; for a review, see Inceoglu et al., 2018). There is accelerated interest among leaders and development professionals in the improvement of work life through mindfulness, and organizations worldwide are using mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs; developmentally focused programs and activities built around the mindfulness concept) with their leaders to enhance the individual, team, and organizational functionality. Popular leadership approaches influence how people think and learn about leadership (Guthey et al., 2022); however, the literature discussing the social and relational aspects of mindfulness in leadership is limited.

Recent research suggests the awareness of the self and others that is enhanced by mindfulness practice could improve reflection of feedback, listening, trust and respect, collaboration, better conflict management, reduced emotional contagion, ethical decision making and prosocial behavior, possibly having a beneficial impact on the development of leaders in their role leading others (Good et al., 2016; Roche et al., 2020; Vu and Nguyen, 2022). Nevertheless, the research area lacks a thorough investigation into how practicing mindfulness could help leaders tap into their other-orientation (e.g. Dietl and Reb, 2021; Pircher Verdorfer, 2016). Empirical research on mindfulness in relationships originating mainly outside of management research indicates that mindfulness practice can benefit interpersonal relationships by influencing the interlinked processes of other-directed attention, affect, and behavior—such as perspective-taking, compassion, and sharing cultivated in relationships (e.g. Barnes et al., 2007; Fazia et al., 2020; for reviews see Donald et al., 2019; Skoranski et al., 2019). Research on mindfulness for leaders (e.g. Ceravolo and Raines, 2019; Crivelli et al., 2019; Lundqvist et al., 2018; Vonderlin et al., 2021; for reviews, see Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Urrila, 2022) and in workplace settings in general (for a review, see Eby et al., 2019) has typically taken a positivistic approach to assessing the influence of mindfulness-based interventions on individuals using predefined well-being and performance-related outcome measures (Karjalainen et al., 2021).

An empirical focus on a stressful work environment lends itself to criticism concerning reducing the originally interconnected mindfulness practice to a personal stress-reduction and attention-enhancement technique (e.g. Purser, 2018). It has been suggested that promoting mindfulness techniques (such as managing unpleasant emotions by accepting them as they are) as a self-help tool could make people lose their ability for healthy criticism and docilely adapt to systemic causes of stress in search for a better ability to cope and perform in a demanding environment (e.g. du Plessis and Just, 2021; Purser, 2018; Walsh, 2018). It has been proposed that due to its heterogeneous and contextual nature, mindfulness in the organizational settings is prone to various interpretations, which makes cause–effect relationships in mindfulness research uncertain, to say the least (Ihl et al., 2020). Interpretations and uses of mindfulness may vary a great deal depending on how individuals and groups make sense of it, and whether mindfulness is viewed from the perspective of the organization, the group, or the individual (Ihl et al., 2020). Therefore, research on how

mindfulness is really interpreted in organizations has been demanded (Badham and King, 2021; Ihl et al., 2020). Emerging qualitative research (e.g. Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017; Ihme and Sundström, 2021; Islam et al., 2017; Shonin and Van Gordon, 2015) is seeking to advance understanding of the multifaceted expressions of mindfulness in leadership. Yet, the prospect of strengthening leaders' other-orientation necessitates thorough exploration of the other-oriented expressions of mindfulness in the leadership context.

In this study, we examine whether and how mindfulness training contributes to the development of leaders' social awareness by studying the experiences of 62 leaders who participated in an 8-week-long mindfulness training program. Materials for analysis were collected from written pre-intervention assessments and post-intervention interviews. This study contributes to the literature on management learning and mindfulness in leadership in three ways. First, we identify how the leaders who participated in mindfulness training see themselves developing toward becoming more socially aware in situations involving followers across the three interlinked domains of human functioning—the cognitive, affective, and behavioral. By clarifying mindfulness as an interpersonal phenomenon (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2022; Skoranski et al., 2019), we challenge the predominant emphasis of workplace mindfulness research and practice (Eby et al., 2019). Second, we highlight mindfulness as a value-based developmental practice instead of merely a personal stress-reduction and attention-enhancement technique (Purser and Milillo, 2015; Vu and Nguyen, 2022). Third, we propose mindfulness training may be a viable approach to enhance leaders' social awareness through a combination of a formal program and continuous self-development (Svalgaard, 2018), departing from the views of mindfulness as a "quick fix" (Karjalainen et al., 2021). We also provide a conceptual framework that illustrates the pathway with the potential to build social leadership capacity through training leaders in mindfulness.

## Theoretical background

### *Social awareness in leadership*

An organizational leader's role is to set and facilitate the development of a direction and engage and motivate other people (followers) toward accomplishing the common goal (e.g. Day and Dragoni, 2015). Leader–follower relationships may be the most important relationships people have at work and can profoundly influence followers' well-being and performance (Inceoglu et al., 2018). Leadership and leader development efforts aim to expand the collective and the individual capacity to be effective in a leadership role (e.g. Day and Dragoni, 2015; Day et al., 2021). Being, or becoming, a good leader is a question of the right skills, competencies, and practices (Rostron, 2022). Social skills and abilities relevant for a leader would include building relationships, managing communication and conflict, and developing others; However, as the perceptions and personal experiences of a leader shape how they identify and act as a leader, a leader also requires skills related to self-views (one's self-concept and views of oneself) in the form of self-awareness and social awareness (Day et al., 2014, 2021; Kwok et al., 2021; Rooney et al., 2021; Rostron, 2022). These skills contribute toward leaders' *social leadership capacity*, the capacity to be an effective leader in social situations involving followers.

Thorndike (1920) introduced *social intelligence* to refer to a form of intelligence separate from general intelligence that involves the ability to understand other people and "to act wisely in human relations" (p. 228). Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined emotional intelligence as a type of social intelligence involving the ability to understand one's own and others' emotions, and to use that understanding to guide one's thinking and actions. In the management literature, social and emotional intelligence have been viewed as intertwined (social intelligence being the other-oriented

extension of emotional intelligence). The combination involves interacting cognitive processes, emotions, and actions, required by an effective organizational leader to respond wisely in challenging social situations that arise in groups (e.g. Gill, 2011; Goleman, 1995; Mumford et al., 2000).

Self-awareness and social awareness are key components of social and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Carden et al. (2021) define self-awareness as consisting of an awareness of one's emotions, cognitions, and physiological responses that drives one's behaviors and assists an awareness of one's influence on others. According to Carden et al. (2021), the "self" may be viewed as both an intra- and inter-individual construct by nature, meaning that it is made of both conscious and unconscious dimensions of oneself, and perceived in relation to others. "Awareness" may be understood as a combination of one's cognitive awareness concerning one's perception, thinking and awareness of others' feelings, and one's impact on others. It is argued that awareness is a multilevel construct, in that it has both conscious and unconscious levels which the individual may or may not be aware of but may be able to bring to conscious awareness by processing the goings-on of one's mind and body (Carden et al., 2021).

Self-awareness, also defined as "a higher-level concept which includes the extent to which people are consciously aware of their interactions or relationships with others and their internal states" (Sutton et al., 2015: 611) entails the other-oriented quality of consciousness which may be conceptualized in relation to other people. Social awareness involves introspective reflection of the multidimensional self, informed by the observations of others (Carden et al., 2021). Although the importance of self-awareness has been widely recognized in the management literature, social awareness has been given relatively little attention in research and is often discussed alongside, or as a subcategory of, self-awareness (Svalgaard, 2018; for a review, see Carden et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a leader being present for and aware of followers in social situations is deemed critical for the individual leader's capacity to be an effective leader (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Dane and Rockmann, 2020; Reb et al., 2014).

According to current knowledge, self-awareness and social awareness may be developed through a lifelong process of growing and maturing as a human being, through practicing reflexivity in action or retrospectively based on internal and external feedback, and also through practices that encompass and stimulate cognitive, emotional, and sensory functions and introspection (Carden et al., 2021). Consequently, research has been called for to understand the benefits of self- and social awareness, and to explore different methods of teaching them (Carden et al., 2021). To develop such skills, a leader needs to be motivated to develop as a leader (Day et al., 2021; Rosch and Villanueva, 2016). According to Reichard and Johnson (2011), to develop self- and social awareness, it is imperative that the individual leader proactively engages in self-development activities, such as self-reflection of leadership experiences and utilizing the internal and external feedback in on-the-job leadership experiences (Reichard and Johnson, 2011). It has been acknowledged that formal development programs can initiate the continuous development of self- and social awareness at the core of leading people wisely, but according to Svalgaard (2018), the newly enhanced self- and social awareness may fall into disuse once the individual returns to the normal organizational routines. Svalgaard (2018) argues that voluntary mindful awareness of the actual situations that individuals must face at work outside of formal training is a key to sustained self- and social awareness.

### *Mindfulness in relationships*

Common definitions describe mindfulness as a state of attention to and awareness of events and experience in the present moment (e.g. Brown and Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003) that can be pursued intentionally through formal mindfulness meditation practice or informal practice, a way

of “being” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003); for instance, “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003: 145). King and Badham (2020) present mindfulness as “a quality or state of mind that attends to experience, avoiding or overcoming mindlessness by giving full and proper attention to presence, context and purpose,” drawing attention to mindfulness as a contextual wisdom practice (p. 6). While numerous well-known conceptualizations have been developed for mindfulness, there remains no scholastic consensus on its definition (Choi and Leroy, 2015; King and Badham, 2020). Different scholars and practitioners emphasize different aspects of mindfulness depending on their situations and contexts. Gethin (2015) states,

Mindfulness is a word, and like other words, mindfulness is used in a variety of ways. That is, different people, whether ancient Buddhists or contemporary neuroscientists, may use and define mindfulness—in different ways and it is not clear what standards we might use to judge any given account of mindfulness. (p. 9)

Mindfulness as a heterogeneous concept may be placed, for instance, in a spiritual, meditation, neuroscience, or business background (Islam et al., 2017). Research within the Western medical and psychological domain since the late 1970s has focused mainly on the investigation of mindfulness as a stable or fluctuating intra-individual psychological capacity and a type of intervention and practice to induce a mindful mental state, offered for clinical or non-clinical audiences (e.g. mindfulness-based stress reduction or MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Keng et al., 2011). Research on mindfulness originating in psychological contexts has tended to focus on mindfulness as a technique of attention-enhancement. The conceptualizations of mindfulness originating from Buddhism, on the contrary, portray mindfulness as aspects of attention *and* deep awareness of one’s experience that may lead to “awakening” (Gethin, 2011).

Mindfulness practice is centered around the holistic development of the physiological, cognitive and attentional, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual qualities of an individual in relationship to the self and others (Kristeller, 2004). It has been suggested that mindfulness practice increases the human capacity of objectivity about one’s internal experience, which enables taking another’s perspective. This shift in perspective also known as “reperceiving” is “the hallmark of mindfulness practice” (Shapiro et al., 2006: 378). Mindful awareness adds the component of “attunement” between the direct experience and observing of the situation in a broader context of one’s “being” and life. In the interpersonal context, mindfulness may enable focusing on the other person with an attitude of kindness and compassion (e.g. Parker et al., 2015).

Thus, current literature expands the understanding of mindfulness from being a within-person psychological capacity to an interpersonal phenomenon that takes place in social interactions and processes (Donald et al., 2019; Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2022; Skoranski et al., 2019; Vu and Nguyen, 2022). Mindfulness practice is assumed to benefit an individual’s health, well-being, and functioning. Furthermore, mindfulness should then influence the connection with other people (Skoranski et al., 2019). Mindfulness is then referred to as *interpersonal* (e.g. Barnes et al., 2007), *relational* (e.g. Vich et al., 2020), *social* (e.g. Fazia et al., 2020), and *collective* (e.g. Islam et al., 2017) mindfulness. Empirical research on the phenomenon originates mainly in non-work contexts such as parental interaction, romantic relationships, and friendships. That research indicates that practicing mindfulness may benefit interpersonal relationships by influencing the interlinked processes of other-directed attention, affect, and behavior (e.g. Barnes et al., 2007).

In studies of the cognitive aspects of mindfulness related to attention, thinking, and perceiving in relationships, Carson et al. (2004), for instance, found mindfulness intervention to increase people’s acceptance of one another in romantic relationships. Once the emotional aspects of

mindfulness related to feelings and affect in relationships have been studied, the focus has been on emotional awareness and cultivating prosocial emotions via interventions (for a review, see Galante et al., 2014). For example, mindfulness meditation has been associated with interpersonal forgiveness (Karremans et al., 2020) and compassion (Condon et al., 2013; Fredrickson et al., 2008). Studies on the behavioral aspects of mindfulness related to volition in relationships showed that mindfulness interventions increase prosocial behavior, that is, voluntary actions, such as helping, intended to benefit others (for a meta-analysis, see Donald et al., 2019). In addition, communication quality improved owing to reduced negativity and verbal and nonverbal aggression in stressful interpersonal dialogue (Barnes et al., 2007) and constructive and compassionate responding (Barnes et al., 2007; Condon et al., 2013).

Fredrickson et al. (2008) showed that cultivating positive emotions through a mindfulness-based intervention in working adults was linked to improved personal resources, including maintaining positive relations with others. To explain the linkages between the attentional, emotional, and behavioral aspects of mindfulness in relationships, they propose positive affect as a central mechanism driving positive change in and between people. Currently available evidence on mindfulness intervention studies reviewed by Donald et al. (2019) suggests that mindfulness meditation enhances prosocial behaviors through empathetic concern and compassion and that mindfulness-based compassion meditation may enhance prosociality via the mechanisms of emotion regulation and positive affect. The regulation of affect and personal distress, enhanced by mindfulness, has been found to determine how compassionately, altruistically, or kindly people respond to others (Donald et al., 2019; Skoranski et al., 2019). Skoranski et al. (2019) argue that mindful attention, exhibited in the constant dynamic process of interpersonal interaction between people, supports mutual positive affect and reinforces positive behaviors, causing a recursive loop of an increasingly mindful relationship.

Summing up, mindfulness and mindfulness practice, which involves raising awareness of oneself in the context of others, has been conceptualized as a developmental phenomenon occurring in the context of interpersonal relationships. To date, much of the existing empirical research on mindfulness in relationships is set in specific non-work contexts.

### *Application of mindfulness for organizational leaders*

Workplace mindfulness interventions are heterogeneous in terms of length and intensity and often tailored according to the requirements and expectations of the purchasing organization (Bartlett et al., 2019; Davidson and Kazniak, 2015; Islam et al., 2017). Depending on the intervention, they approach mindfulness, for instance, as an instrument for stress-reduction and productivity-enhancement, or as a spiritual practice, which is likely to affect the participants' experience (King and Badham, 2020; Shonin and Van Gordon, 2015). Most typically, mindfulness interventions contain meditation and awareness practices, psychoeducational content, and opportunity for self-reflection (Urrila, 2022). Optimally, developing leaders' social intelligence, value-orientation, and compassion through mindfulness could promote positive organizational forms and supportive leadership characterized by "recognition of long-term consequences of actions, simultaneous awareness of inner self, external reality and work impacts, and commitment to authenticity, truth and responsibility" (Badham and King, 2021: 545).

Researchers and practitioners acknowledge the collective dimension of workplace mindfulness, as the focus of development shifts from individual to organizational, emphasizing interdependence, group mind, and cooperation (Badham and King, 2021; du Plessis and Just, 2021). Mindfulness in organizations may emerge through the interactional and social processes that occur between people, such as creating a healthy learning environment and enhancing interpersonal

functioning, which research suggests could potentially have beneficial transformative effects (du Plessis and Just, 2021; Shapiro et al., 2015). Nevertheless, empirical research on mindfulness for leaders (e.g. Ceravolo and Raines, 2019; Crivelli et al., 2019; Lundqvist et al., 2018; for reviews, see Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Urrila, 2022) and in workplace settings in general (for a review, see Eby et al., 2019) tends to focus on the stressfulness of the work from the outset. While research has shown that practicing mindfulness can help individual leaders often working in high-stress environments like the corporate world and healthcare to restore their personal resources, sufficing with that has elicited criticism.

Among holistic well-being approaches that organizations worldwide are using to enhance the individual, team, and organizational functionality, mindfulness brings to the fore the personal, social, and spiritual aspects of being a human at work. This leaves room for interpretations and blurs the boundaries between the private and the professional. Due to the heterogeneity attached to the concept of mindfulness, Islam et al. (2017) characterize workplace mindfulness as an “empty signifier,” meaning that there is no one agreed definition for it or its effects. This implies “a field in which alternative and sometimes opposing camps may struggle over the meanings and applications of the term” (Islam et al., 2017: 2). For one organizational member, mindfulness may be a handy pocket tool to take out in stressful situations; for another one it represents a deep-rooted spiritual practice. Furthermore, the interpretations of what mindfulness practice means, and what it implies, may vary in the organizational, group, and individual levels (Ihl et al., 2020). The organization level may be most interested in performance improvement and business goals, the group level in improved relationships, the individual practitioner may find the meaning in newly found calmness, or the quest for the life’s purpose. Therefore, recent research has come to consider unintended or potentially negative effects of mindfulness at the workplace (Ihl et al., 2020). As mindfulness is always practiced and experienced on the individual level and any specific outcomes cannot be “ordered,” the practice could lead to unintended organizational outcomes, such as attrition, as Ihl et al. (2020) point out. It could also result in issues in group-level dynamics, when some individuals are pro and others against it. Existing knowledge considers mindfulness meditation practice as a generally safe way to improve psychological health when practiced and administered correctly, but there is little research that would specifically address possible adverse health and well-being effects of mindfulness for individuals, such as problems due to forced breathing or meditation addiction (Shonin et al., 2014). Anyhow, individuals who experience discomfort or fear of social reactions due to practicing and do not want to practice mindfulness in the company of colleagues, may experience distress (du Plessis and Just, 2021; Ihl et al., 2020).

The more broadly mindfulness is understood, the more difficult it is to measure, let alone pre-determine, outcomes (Islam et al., 2017). The “emptiness” of the concept means that it is not known how the concept of mindfulness in organizational settings may be molded to support meanings and ideologies (Islam et al., 2017). Mindfulness in the social organizational and managerial context may appropriate an individual’s psychological resources and spirituality, a “sense of peace,” toward the demands of productive work, misappropriating and politicizing the practice and even exploiting people (du Plessis and Just, 2021; Ihl et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2017: 4). One of the main criticisms concerns the individual-focused, instrumental use of mindfulness as an organizational means to ignore perceived stress by transferring the responsibility onto the individual practitioner instead of true efforts to remove the systemic sources of stress in fact falling outside of the individual’s control (e.g. Purser, 2018; Walsh, 2018). It has been suggested that the branding of mindfulness as a self-care practice wrongly inflates the individual’s sense of autonomy and agency, as if to detach the individual from one’s social, political, and economic context (Purser, 2018). This could corrupt mindfulness practice intended to connect people, not separate them from each other

and the context they live in (Purser, 2018). Purser and Loy (2013) assert that “right mindfulness is guided by intentions and motivations based on self-restraint, wholesome mental states, and ethical behaviors—goals that include but supersede stress-reduction and improvements in concentration” (p. 4).

Overall, recent critical literature on mindfulness in organizational settings calls for practices that support mindful consideration and reflection instead of mere stress-reduction and performance-related outcomes (e.g. Badham and King, 2021; du Plessis and Just, 2021). Emerging collective and substantive approaches to mindfulness in organizations emphasize values such as interconnectedness and collaboration instead of within-person attention and awareness. A line of empirical research within management studies is seeking to advance understanding of the multifaceted expressions of mindfulness in leadership. It does so by employing notions of mindfulness that are in line with Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness as a developmental wisdom practice that intrinsically involves contemplation directed toward internal and external phenomena (meditation), introspective monitoring of mental state and actions, and value-based evaluation that only people are capable of, concerning not only oneself but other people (Gethin, 2011; Purser and Milillo, 2015). This understanding is viewed to advance the debate about mindfulness in the organizational context (Badham and King, 2021).

Emerging empirical research indicates that a leader’s mindfulness practice may facilitate a positive form of leadership—involving the ability to take the perspective of others (e.g. Wasylikiw et al., 2015), empathize with others (e.g. Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017), and internalize the social and ethical norms for behavior (e.g. Nübold et al., 2019). So far, few mindfulness intervention studies have focused on the social and relational aspects of mindfulness-based leadership development (Islam et al., 2017). Those quantitative intervention studies with a direct focus on the leader–follower dyad have focused on measuring the effect of mindfulness practice on behavioral outcomes (Lange and Rowold, 2019; Nübold et al., 2019). None of the existing qualitative mindfulness intervention studies have focused on leader development involving followers as the main context of the investigation. Instead, they have approached leaders’ perceptions of their leadership in general, mainly from the personal well-being perspective (Ihme and Sundström, 2021; Mahfouz, 2018; Rupperecht et al., 2019; Wasylikiw et al., 2015), with small sample sizes. Three prior qualitative studies focusing on leaders’ independent mindfulness practice (Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017; Lippincott, 2018; Vu and Gill, 2018) suggest that practicing mindfulness can heighten leaders’ social and contextual awareness.

In sum, mindfulness in work-related settings may be viewed as a developmental practice to support relationships and the collective good, rather than merely a personal stress-reduction and attention-enhancement technique (Purser and Milillo, 2015; Skoranski et al., 2019). The interpersonal conceptualizations of mindfulness may be particularly relevant for leadership, as leadership is inherently relational and takes place in leader–follower interactions (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2022; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Research investigating how the awareness of the self and others enhanced by mindfulness influences the development of leaders has been demanded (e.g. Good et al., 2016; Hyland et al., 2015). Empirical research seeking to understand how a leader’s mindfulness practice could support leadership relationships is an emerging stream (e.g. Nübold et al., 2019; Roche et al., 2020). That is perhaps surprising given the recognition that other-orientation and taking an interest in the needs of others may be a key aspect of mindfulness in leadership (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016). We argue that the other-oriented components of mindfulness, such as perspective-taking, compassion, and sharing cultivated in relationships (Skoranski et al., 2019) warrant exploration in the context of organizational leadership.



## Method

To investigate whether and how mindfulness training contributes to the development of leaders' social awareness in the context of followers, we study the experiences of 62 leaders who participated in an 8-week mindfulness program. Empirical research on mindfulness for leaders (e.g. Crivelli et al., 2019) has often taken a positivistic approach to assessing the influence of mindfulness-based interventions on individuals using predefined well-being and performance-related outcome measures (Karjalainen et al., 2021). Leader mindfulness may be viewed as a social phenomenon that may bear relational value, therefore in the organizational context it may need to be treated as an emergent (instead of a fixed) concept that is being formed in the social and processual organizational context (Ihl et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2017). Thus, its study can greatly benefit from the qualitative approach. A qualitative intervention approach that features a longitudinal pre-post design is expected to build understanding of how leaders engage in mindfulness practice in the organizational context involving their followers. Interventions may be examined qualitatively, viewing interventions as "producing outcomes not directly but only via introducing resources into a setting which local actors may then use and in doing so may trigger mechanisms," and so might generate beneficial outcomes (Warren et al., 2020). Intervention participants are expected to be able to provide realist accounts of how the intervention works for them. The content of a first-person description is always directly linked to the lived, conscious experience of a human who experiences it as subjectively relevant and for which the subjective self, the first person, can provide an account (Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017; Varela and Shear, 1999). By investigating the leader's personal experience in a specific context, management research can respond to questions concerning the internalized role and the development of an individual leader (Rostron, 2022). Thus, the perceptions and experiences of the leaders were probed in this study.

### Research setting

*Intervention.* Five 8-week mindfulness interventions were organized in 2019, one for each participating organization. The first author took responsibility for the delivery of the interventions and data collection. The training was coordinated and conducted by an experienced mindfulness trainer. Participants were recruited by the participating organizations' human resource departments.

Each intervention consisted of six 90-minute group sessions delivered at an approximately 1.5-week interval. The purpose of the intervention was to increase participants' knowledge of mindfulness and introduce mindfulness practices. The intervention contained mindfulness practice and invited self-reflection and open discussion. The participants received guidance for independent practice and had access to a mobile application featuring 16 mindfulness meditation recordings, including body-scanning and (self-)compassion.

*Participants.* The current research is informed by data elicited from 62 organizational leaders (56 female, 6 male) who participated in a mindfulness intervention offered by their employers, five Finnish organizations across different sectors. In all, 22 participants worked in health, 17 in insurance, 9 in forestry, 10 in information technology, and 4 in production. A leader was defined as a leader, manager, or supervisor who had direct reports; in this article, "followers." On average, the participants had 17 direct reports. Their experience in leadership positions varied between 1 and 30 years (average 10 years). Their ages varied between 26 and 63 years (average 45 years). A total of 52 informants were Finnish, 10 were of other European nationalities. All participants actively participated in the intervention. Participation in the intervention was voluntary, and participants were not paid for participation in the research.

## Data collection

The data for analysis were collected from written pre-intervention tasks and post-intervention interviews with the 62 participants. Data collection took place between January and November 2019. The first author, who was familiar with the research setting and arranged the mindfulness intervention research project, collected the material for analysis and conducted the interviews.

The written pre-tasks were completed before the intervention commenced. We asked the participants to write a self-reflective text about their recent experience and their expectations for personal development, and from the mindfulness training. The lengths of the written tasks were typically one to two pages of typewritten text. After the intervention ended (maximum 3 weeks), participants were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured. The first author asked open-ended questions from the participants about their experiences of mindfulness training. The questions followed a structure which allowed freedom and flexibility for the participants to describe their personal experience in the way that was meaningful for them. Everyone was asked about their experiences with mindfulness training (e.g. *What do you think of mindfulness as a learning experience?*), how they understood and practiced mindfulness (e.g. *Please describe what mindfulness means to you, in your terms?*), how they viewed their development as a leader (e.g. *What is the most important area of development for you personally as a leader?*), and if and how they viewed mindfulness could support them in the leader role (e.g. *Do you see the mindfulness training offered for leaders, and mindfulness practice, could support your leadership and how?*). Asking follow-up questions required flexibly stepping outside the guiding structure when the interviewer sensed an area of importance for the interviewee. Examples were asked to allow in-depth exploration and enrichen the interviewees' descriptions. The interview duration varied between 26 and 76 minutes (average 48 minutes); 39 interviews were conducted face-to-face and 23 remotely.

## Data preparation and analysis

Extensive qualitative data were gathered to provide an adequate account of the experience of the participants, who were "knowledgeable agents" willing and able to describe their organizational reality, thoughts, intentions, and actions (Gioia et al., 2012: 17). Thematic content analysis was conducted to classify the raw data into thematic categories and dimensions. Handwritten reflective notes and frameworks were compiled at the interview stage. Emerging themes and sub-themes were identified in an iterative, continuous manner. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and downloaded to the NVivo program by the first author. The first author conducted the coding of raw data. A systematic approach by Gioia et al. (2012) that was suitable for qualitative and interpretive inductive research that facilitates new concept development was utilized to aid analyzing the data and to present findings. In line with Gioia et al. (2012), the informant-centric terms and codes presented as first-order concepts and the researcher-centric themes presented as second-order themes demonstrate the connections between the data and the emerging concepts, while the aggregate dimensions answer the research question on the theoretical level (p. 21). The second author was involved in the verification of the first-order categories, second-order themes, aggregate dimensions, and the thematic data structure in different stages of its development. Regular discussions took place between the authors during the research process, which provided a deeper understanding of the findings and increased transparency among the author team.

## Evaluation of qualitative research

The primary goal of qualitative research like the current study is to learn about the subjective experiences of individuals. Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed a set of criteria for evaluating

qualitative research that relies on relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). A key principle in establishing qualitative rigor is ensuring trustworthiness, which is indicated by data having credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is particularly important when dealing with large qualitative data sets (White et al., 2012). In this research, attention to quality and trustworthiness was established through the systematic planning and organization of the entire research project throughout the design, intervention delivery, data collection, data analysis, and reporting phases. Following the principles of research ethics, the research participants were asked to read the information document prepared about the research and sign an Informed Consent form.

## Findings

The findings of the study are now examined in detail. First, we present the leaders' pre-intervention expectations of mindfulness training to illuminate the context in which the leaders worked and their leadership and leader development priorities concerning mindfulness training. Then, we present the post-intervention interview findings. The focus is on the leaders' expressions of social awareness across three related yet distinct dimensions—*other-oriented thought*, *other-oriented emotion*, and *other-oriented behavior*. Finally, we discuss the leaders' understandings of mindfulness as a leader development method. The interview excerpts are labeled according to the intervention group A, B, C, D, or E and the number assigned to each participant within the group.

### *Leaders' expectations for mindfulness training*

The leaders' written accounts gathered before the start of the mindfulness program reported heavy workloads, challenging relationships with followers, and difficulties with team functioning. The leaders hoped mindfulness training could improve their stress management and coping skills, calmness and mental balance, self-compassion, and emotional development. As one leader said,

The biggest development [due to this course] should by far occur in stress management and being kind to myself. I believe this would also help in the supervisory work—I wouldn't so often appear to be "the always so busy leader," and I would be more present for them. (D3)

So, the leaders believed that strengthening their own mental skills through mindfulness could help them be more supportive leaders. Promisingly, the leaders also expressed their intention to bring the mindfulness learnings for their followers to provide them with means to restore their mental resources and to take care of their own well-being, which could, in the best case, lead to the improved *overall well-being of the entire team*. One of the leaders put it this way:

[The mindfulness course] interests me also because the nature of my followers' work has become more burdening during the past year, and that won't ease in the future. I would like to see if mindfulness could help them in some way. (C4)

Second, the leaders talked about their expectations from mindfulness training for enhanced *focusing* abilities and work performance. For example, one leader said that he expected mindfulness training to bring mental clarity that would possibly affect his followers:

I have never really familiarized myself with mindfulness. . . . I expect the mental balance to help me see the most important things in my work clearly, and ease structuring my work and my leadership model

because I'm afraid I am a little restless. I have bad conscience all the time, like does this affect my followers, even when they know we're in the same boat. (A3)

Third, the leaders discussed their expectation that mindfulness training would help them *connect with others* through improved presence and thus be able to support their followers better. For example, one leader explained how she felt that with the help of mindfulness techniques, she could act as an encouraging and present-oriented role model for positive behavior among her team:

I hope to be able to be more and better present also in the situations in which I work with the experts in my team. I'd like to encourage and help them to be more creative and find their strength in new and insecure situations. I expect concrete techniques that I can apply, to stop in the moment better than before and help others do the same. (C6)

Fourth, the leaders discussed expectations regarding personal *leader development*. Some reported quite broadly that they believed mindfulness could provide concrete tools for self-development and self-leadership. Others hoped for enhanced self-confidence and a clearer sense of purpose and picture of oneself as a leader. Many believed mindfulness would increase their self-knowledge and help leverage that knowledge better in the leader role, as exemplified by this leader:

I have high hopes regarding this course. Hopefully, the training will support me in forming a clearer picture of my stronger and weaker skills as a manager and give me tools to cope with the weaknesses and improve them. (E3)

Based on the pre-intervention assessment, the leaders were motivated to develop themselves to become better leaders. The majority did not have any prior experience of mindfulness training nor an adequate understanding of the type of practice involved thus their expectations of mindfulness were quite broad and outcome-focused. They seemed open to mindfulness and believed that the mindfulness training could benefit themselves and their followers, but they had not yet experienced *how* mindfulness could help them as leaders.

### *Leaders' experiences of mindfulness training*

The analysis of the leaders' experiences following their participation in an 8-week mindfulness program revealed developments that the leaders associated with mindfulness training and practice. Figure 1 illustrates the findings through a thematic data structure.

#### *Other-oriented thought*

The theme of *other-oriented thought* concerns the cognitive domain: attention, perceptions, perspectives, and attitudes.

**Present-moment orientation.** Participating in mindfulness training offered the leaders insights into the importance of focusing on their direct experience in the "here-and-now." They came to view presence as something that they wished to better integrate in their way of working with others. A few respondents also remarked that followers "deserved" to have their leader's presence.

The leaders commonly reported how mindfulness had enhanced their *awareness of direct experience*. For example, one leader described how she had learned to get in touch with what was

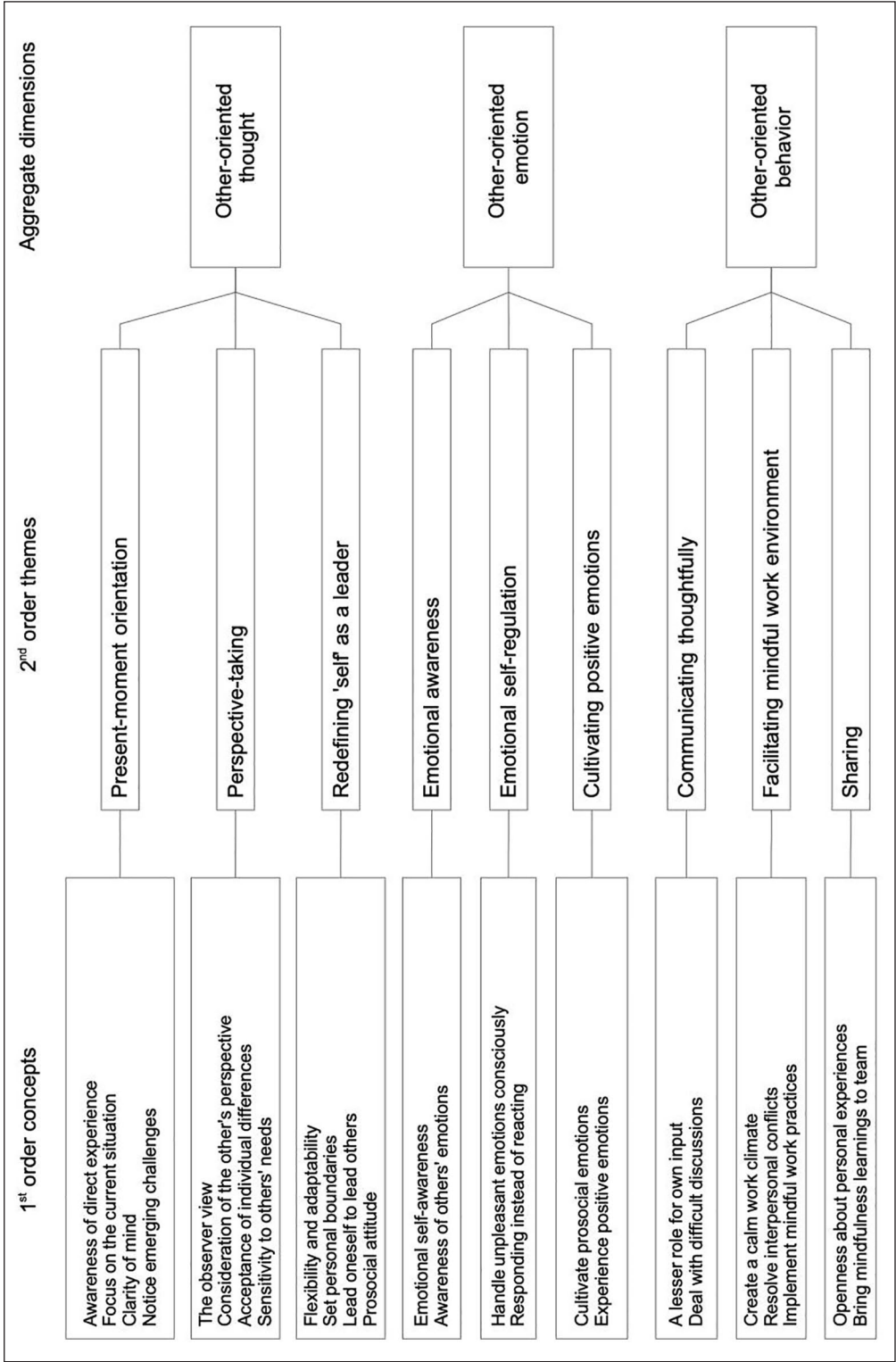


Figure 1. Data structure for the leaders' experiences of mindfulness training.

currently happening within herself, cognitively, emotionally, and sensually, which extends to interacting with her followers:

Awareness is the key [in practicing mindfulness], like awareness of one's feelings, and stress level, and presence, and focus, and then awareness of others' viewpoints and feelings. (D1)

The leaders thus appeared to understand that their internal states influenced their interaction with employees and that mindfulness helped create a positive, calming presence. They also said that mindfulness practice helped them *focus on the current situation*, something seen as particularly useful when under pressure and in challenging one-on-one discussions, for instance, with followers with a different communication style. Consciously transitioning to a new situation was often mentioned as a newly acquired practice that could be fitted into leaders' busy schedules, as this leader described:

Moving from one encounter to another . . . I can [now] better . . . close the previous encounter and then meet the new person or new people and topic, so that I am more present in the situation. . . . I have developed in that [way due to mindfulness]. For instance, in a meeting, I don't think about the previous meeting or the next meeting, every encounter is valuable . . . I walk down that aisle calmly, breathing calmly, consciously. (C12)

So, the leaders realized that it is possible to control the distractable mind to a certain extent. They also described mindfulness practice helped attain *clarity of mind*, which was perceived as an invaluable attribute to facilitate effective communication with followers. For example, this leader said mindfulness helped her keep a clear head amid daily challenges:

In the afternoons, it may have been really challenging to lead a unit meeting when I've felt that my words had become porridge and I said wrong words and when I'm just no longer able to produce sensible speech, which can be a challenge for a supervisor when you're leading a unit meeting . . . So, now I haven't had this. . . . My thoughts are clearer, so when I discuss and talk, I don't have to make an effort to find the words, so all in all, I feel clear and good. (B18)

She continued to explain how mindfulness practice enabled her to act on issues promptly:

You can quickly sense what the situation is, and move on to develop a solution, and also have the employees participate in it, give them the facts in a way that they can understand, since these unplanned situations happen quickly . . . so it's about how you solve them. (B18)

This exemplifies an important observation of the leaders related to how their heightened present-moment orientation improved their ability to *notice emerging challenges* within the team.

**Perspective-taking.** Due to mindfulness learning, the leaders began to see themselves as becoming open to other people's viewpoints. This meant consciously creating the mental space to accommodate the other people's views, being less forceful and attached to their own opinions, being more sensitive, and being willing to listen to others, all practices seen as enhancing objectivity.

The leaders often mentioned an improved ability to take *the observer view* of an objective outsider when facing difficult situations in the team instead of becoming entangled in the issue. This objectivity sometimes involved mentally detaching from others' annoying or even destructive behavior, as this leader reported:

So, it is quite hectic, and you must react to everything immediately . . . and one easily goes into this state when it is busy all the time, all the time there is a fire somewhere. So now I can at least observe when the situation gets like that, when the people are in that state . . . I can calm the situation in a way from outside it, not going into the same panic myself. (A10)

Stepping back and keeping a distance enabled the leaders to stay calm and avoid progressing to a state of alarm, which was seen as helpful in guiding followers through challenges.

The leaders reported an improved ability to *consider the other's perspective*, which involved increased sensitivity to followers' underlying motivations and intentions, such as things left unsaid, that could be influential beneath the surface. This sensitivity was seen as key in directing the followers toward the right goals, as exemplified by this leader who was keen to understand her followers on a deeper level:

Go behind the fact "OK this person is now happy or angry," like what it is the thing in the background . . . You should not hurry . . . but rather stop, observe and give time for the interaction as it is in that moment, and if you want to steer the person in some direction, it will not happen fast. With mindfulness, you can learn patience . . . You come to understand why this person did not take my message and do what I wanted straight away. (A2)

Moreover, many leaders reported that mindfulness had influenced their ability to *accept individual differences*. For instance, this leader had started to accept that some people tend to be more optimistic while others are pessimistic:

What stuck in my mind quite well was [that] others are pessimistic, and others are optimistic, and then you should be able to tell who is what . . . who brings what thinking to this . . . so I have started to think more about what is this person's and that person's point of view, because facts are the same for everyone. (D1)

Furthermore, interviewees described how mindfulness had improved their *sensitivity to others' needs*. For example, this leader reported how mindfulness meant he may be better able to notice if a follower's well-being was at risk or if there were other problems:

To learn to recognize the alarm signs when some people perform badly somehow or if there's a problem with coping. (D2)

**Redefining "self" as a leader.** The leaders expressed how mindfulness training encouraged developing the idea of the self as a leader, in reference to examining one's attitudes, character, values, motivations, and desires. Consequently, mindfulness was seen as having imparted new insights into their own identity and role as a leader, including recognition of their function as role models.

The leaders often mentioned that mindfulness training had taught them to cope in a constantly changing work environment involving juggling people-related responsibilities and other work tasks. For example, this leader described how mindfulness had helped her to relax and adopt the attitude of trusting that everything would work out:

My attitude and how I respond, for example . . . if there are absences, they always must be covered . . . The situation can change so many times between Tuesday and Thursday, so I don't worry about those situations beforehand anymore . . . I've learned that I won't worry about it before it's time to act. It would be a complete waste. . . . So, these things don't cause horrible anxiety anymore. (B2)

Thus, mindfulness conferred *flexibility and adaptability*.

On many occasions, mindfulness learning had encouraged the leaders to reconsider their perceptions of their leadership qualities, most typically their internal need to overperform or seek perfection. Interestingly, a major theme raised was *setting personal boundaries* that were stricter than before. The newly gained confidence was viewed to help the leaders to perform well in the leader role, as exemplified by this participant:

When you're so conscientious, [it] turns negative when you try to stretch and do everything. . . . You try to do your best, like write a retirement speech that matters to the listener. . . . There, mindfulness has been good. My workload is not going to change, but I can change my attitude. . . . It's not the end of the world if something won't be done. . . . The change in my own thinking, my attitude toward the community, my own working, how much is expected from me. . . . I don't want work to get me down, so in a way, there has to be a balance. (B7)

Mindfulness training seemed to help the leaders develop self-compassion and to be lenient on themselves, which made them feel both more balanced and at the same time more accomplished. That development also involved insights relating to self-criticism. This appeared to be such an important realization that several leaders described having already established clearer limits relating to followers, which, for instance, involved not responding to all new requests immediately or sometimes shutting their office door.

Curiously, the leaders' accounts involved insights into *leading oneself to be able to lead others* that they linked to mindfulness training. Mindfulness was commonly seen as a self-leadership method that enables leading others well, as captured by a female unit head:

I see it quite strongly as a self-leadership tool. The idea here is that when your own stuff is in order, then you can lead others. . . . There are many things about how you can use [mindfulness] for leadership, but they are a bit secondary. The biggest thing for me . . . is that when you are on good terms with yourself, you can do that leadership job for others. (A8)

Additionally, the leaders found mindfulness learning aligned with their intention to provide support for and to serve their followers wisely, as this leader expressed:

I hope I'll grow this great wisdom which I can then share with others. (D1)

Thus, mindfulness seemed to strengthen a *prosocial attitude* in some leaders.

### *Other-oriented emotion*

The theme of *other-oriented emotion* concerns the affective domain: feelings, emotional states, and moods.

*Emotional awareness.* Due to training in mindfulness, the leaders developed the ability to notice emotions in oneself and others.

Among the leaders, *emotional self-awareness* could mean noticing their unproductive emotions in each situation, often observed in the context of their followers. For example, this leader had learned to become aware of being irritated when she was interrupted:

Then you notice, for example, sometimes when a team member comes by and they can clearly see that steam is almost coming from my head, so it is easier in a way for me to recognize my own feelings after the mindfulness course, that "OK, now I'm getting in the angry sector." (B5)



Furthermore, the ability to recognize one's own feelings extended to recognizing their followers' emotions. The leaders reported that practicing mindfulness enhanced their *awareness of others' emotions*, as a female director noted:

You notice not just your own emotional states but that of the people you lead. . . . You try to understand what could be behind them, and what influences them. (C8)

*Emotional self-regulation.* Learning to manage and self-regulate automatic emotional reactions proactively was a common theme in the leaders' accounts. Mindfulness helped the leaders realize that it is possible to work on an emotion internally before the internal state or any harmful reactive consequence, such as lashing out in front of a follower, becomes visible to others.

Then *handling unpleasant emotions consciously* became possible. That approach was seen as central to recovering quickly from frustration, learning from the event, and not letting negative emotions harm the team, as explained by one leader:

You must let the feelings come out too, but in some other situation, when I'm not with the staff . . . in a way I can dissolve them in some other way, those, what, fears or unpleasant situations or others, for instance with these [mindfulness] practices I can dissolve them. (B4)

Emotional self-regulation often involved *responding instead of reacting*; instead of sharpness finding a wiser way around an emotionally challenging or irritating situation. Often that involved the leader signified adapting their communication behavior. For instance, one leader described a major change in her way of responding instead of reacting to an irritating situation with a follower:

Well, I have this one [team member] who . . . well, let's say that [s/he] is the kind of person who gets easily agitated, so with this person [I] must be careful . . . so that [I] don't do the same and get to that same state. So, I'm like . . . I consciously say [to myself] "Now, a couple of breaths and a calm voice, and continue . . ." (B11)

*Cultivating positive emotions.* The leaders seemed to have developed a sense of responsibility over the emotional atmosphere at the workplace due to mindfulness. The leaders reported that their practice of mindfulness had increased the instances of having positive other-oriented emotions, such as relaxation, joy, gratitude, compassion, and kindness, in the interactions with followers.

The leaders described having started to consciously *cultivate prosocial emotions* among others. For instance, one leader described an experience of a shared happy moment with a follower. Mindfulness learning had helped her understand the value of seizing the moment, an example of informal mindfulness practice:

Just now with [a team member] whose family situation has been tight . . . and we talked, and it was so lovely to enjoy with her so truly and bubblingly, it made me feel good, too. It was a happy moment. . . . It wasn't for that long a time, but I felt she also felt good about it when we were there, and I listened to her story. And that [moment] could have just . . . passed, had we not paused there. (B1)

Additionally, the leaders *experienced connection* with followers, as described by this leader:

I feel that instead of, like before they have sent me email, now they have more eagerly called or come talk face-to-face, so could it be that I've been more relaxed and somehow happier and not so filled with hurry and negativity, so that others could have noticed it too, I don't know. (A2)

The nuances of connection seemed so subtle one might miss them without the present-moment awareness the leaders viewed mindfulness learning offered them. Overall, the space provided by mindfulness practice seemed to broaden the leaders' awareness of their spectrum of emotions in the work context. Consequently, they had started to intentionally cultivate space for positive emotions among their teams.

### *Other-oriented behavior*

The theme of *other-oriented behavior* concerns the behavioral domain, that is, voluntary action.

*Communicating thoughtfully.* The leaders reported that practicing mindfulness provided a means to engage with awareness in verbal and nonverbal communication with others, which involves behavioral regulation in communication.

The leaders typically emphasized listening as the cornerstone of respectful interaction in their role. With the help of mindfulness and enhanced present-moment orientation, they felt that they could facilitate dialogue in one-to-one discussions with followers *by ensuring a lesser role for their own input*, as one leader put it:

I feel that I've left out a lot of my own, kind of, train of thought from those discussions, and maybe just that . . . I've been able to be quiet, able to wait, able to listen. (D3)

The leaders described that keeping quiet more often or delaying their response was beneficial to allowing the followers the space to express themselves. Merely observing—something the leaders reported they had learned in mindfulness training—helped avoid rushing to say something and instead allowing others time to respond, which could elicit valuable input from the other person.

Additionally, the leaders perceived that mindfulness helped them in terms of *dealing with difficult discussions* more kindly and patiently, which usually involved responding with improved self-regulation. For instance, one leader described at length how her tactic in discussing sickness absences with a follower had changed dramatically after the realization that a straightforward approach was not the most fruitful option:

Now I have consciously done so that I let the employee first tell me about their own issues . . . and I have kept quiet, let the other person speak, so I have given them the space for presence and then we have gone forward with the difficult matter. So, there it's been significant. . . . The result is a lot better; it is then easier for the person to speak about the difficult matter and go through it after they have space for it. (B1)

*Facilitating mindful work environment.* The leaders often brought up the theme of facilitating follower work performance and team functioning when they described a leader's responsibilities where mindfulness skills could be useful. This meant helpful action to ease people's work at the workplace.

*Creating a calm work climate* was seen as an important responsibility of a leader where mindfulness could help. For instance, this leader recognized that she could influence her team by the quality of her own state of mind:

This simple thing that you do (practicing mindfulness) can have wider effects. Certainly, it does show when you focus on something for a moment and get other things off your mind and become calm. Of course, your own presence will impact your surroundings, and your being, and of course the team will immediately sense it in you. They know exactly when you're busy . . . they can read it from you. . . . So, the state you go there in has a big impact. (B10)

The leaders seemed to have understood that the mental and emotional factors affecting the climate in the team were contagious and, in fact, could be influenced by an intentional leadership practice.

Mindfulness learning was also seen as providing tangible support for *resolving interpersonal conflicts*, which leaders regularly had to deal with. For instance, one leader explained that careful observation, induced by mindfulness practice, helped her adopt a neutral, present-oriented stance:

Like, you have this idea of each employee and then, you hear this, and you hear that, and then there is a conflict . . . it is dangerous, but you could, like form a picture beforehand . . . when these people . . . So, one should not form that picture based on prior assumptions, so for me, this is a major area of development, but I mean . . . It does require one to stop and remember that, well, there mindfulness probably can help. (B15)

Interestingly, the mindfulness training had prompted the interviewees to start *implementing mindful work practices* for various purposes, such as raising the team's emotional awareness. One leader explained,

I call it a check-in moment . . . At the beginning of each team meeting, everyone shares their own feelings they came to that meeting with . . . Everyone understands that one person is tired and angry, and maybe another is really excited. So, everyone knows where we are. I introduced this after a session of [mindfulness] training that discussed how you can really come to this moment . . . It is really nice for me to know if the whole team is in a bad mood, because then it's useless to go through something boring, then I can start from a little different angle. (D4)

*Sharing.* The leaders thought that mindfulness training had encouraged sharing mental and relational energy and information with others. Mindfulness was seen as encouraging authenticity and *openness about personal experiences*. For instance, one leader seemed to even surprise herself by her new found openness:

During this [mindfulness] course, I have tried to tell [my team] a little more about myself, I'm sure [the mindfulness course] has caused that in a way, I've even been a little astonished and asked myself why did I say that about myself. I'm usually quite reserved, I don't speak about private matters, only neutral ones, but now I realized that I spoke about a truly personal matter . . . I kind of didn't see anything to lose . . . It felt like something that I could share. It was a bigger thing, so maybe it was time to mention it. (B18)

Mindfulness training clearly resonated with the leaders' willingness to share delicate personal matters and vulnerabilities with their followers more openly, which was seen to help build trust.

*Bringing mindfulness learning to the team* was a common desire among those leaders who had participated in mindfulness training. The leaders frequently found ways to directly integrate mindfulness learning in day-to-day leadership work, as one leader exemplified:

Last week my team member had a difficult situation with her own team member, and I noticed that both of them had feelings going on and I foresaw we might not be getting to the topic at all, so I just told them that I was doing this training and . . . [asked] would you like to try this practice? And we did it together and I think it had a good, a surprisingly good, impact on that situation and everyone had a calmer mind when we started to solve it. (C8)

In sum, we discovered that participation in mindfulness training was perceived by leaders to affect their interaction with followers in three domains of social awareness—other-oriented thought, other-oriented emotion, and other-oriented behavior. Table 1 summarizes the themes.

### *Leaders' understandings of mindfulness as a developmental practice*

We now present the leaders' thoughts on the relevance of mindfulness to them as leaders. The enhanced other-orientations induced by mindfulness training and practice reported above seemed to strengthen the leaders' views of themselves as those who could *positively influence challenging work situations* requiring that they constantly interact with other people. Becoming aware of the consequences of the alternative (mindful or less mindful) ways to respond in certain situations was key in this development, as crystallized by one leader:

When you are about to get frustrated . . . I mean these situations come every day, so you take the mindfulness gear and choose whether you go along with that tightness, or whether you take it a little easier. So, this—choosing the path—is the takeaway from this course. (B20)

The leaders commonly recognized that the 8-week training was only the *beginning of a longer development process*, as one leader explained:

Eight weeks is such a short time that perhaps nothing has yet changed. It may be that some thoughts have only just begun to emerge. . . . I think it'll take some time from me . . . Let's say a few months from here, the next half a year, maybe then I will see if I can integrate some of the practices into leadership, I don't think that it'll happen very quickly. (D1)

So, the leaders perceived that the continuous journey initiated by the formal mindfulness training could potentially lead to deeper self-awareness and improved capacity to act wisely as a leader. The positive experiences during the training program motivated the leaders to consider *mindfulness as a practice they would like to engage in on long-term*, as this leader described:

Isn't it more like a process . . . that at best, doesn't end? I mean somehow it will live in me, I mean I don't ever stop thinking, like, more "mindful" . . . If I've got these new ideas, or realized something, or got help with stress management, I don't just suddenly stop it. Surely it does not stop when [mindfulness training] ends. I guess for me . . . I hope that this is something lasting. (B12)

The idea of mindfulness as an ongoing process contained the recognition that the key to reaping lasting benefits may be a regular practice—rewarding, yet painfully hard to maintain. During the intervention, active participation, engaging in mindfulness practices and self-reflection contributed to the perceived developments. After the intervention, the leaders discussed their desire to *establish practical personal mindfulness practice*. Even when often mentioned as a restraint, this comment conveys that lack of time may not be a real constraint:

If the impact is what I can already see . . . small change has already happened . . . [mindfulness practice] will take a kind of established place in my life. . . . I will take care of those calming breaks and increase them . . . I will find more opportunities for [mindfulness], instead of browsing [the newspaper] with my cellphone, I'll close my eyes and spend five minutes by myself. (C14)

Finally, the leaders shared their reflections on the *distinct characteristics of mindfulness training* as a method of leadership and leader development among other human resource development

**Table 1.** Second-order themes and exemplary quotations.

Theme	Description	Exemplary quotation
Other-oriented thought		
Present-moment orientation	Leaders learn to focus on their direct experience in the "here-and-now."	<i>Mindfulness in a way helps me to listen to people more carefully, as you strip off the distractions, and you create ways of working for yourself, like, when you have agreed on something, so then you kind of encounter, and that encounter is "clean" and it does not contain any distractions, so that brings the quality to it, I've noticed. (B13)</i>
Perspective-taking	Leaders see themselves as becoming open to other people's viewpoints.	<i>This kind of mindfulness towards myself and others, like, well I have always been really good with systems, and I learn quickly, So, to understand that everyone is not like that, and I think some of my team members feel pressured . . . So, [now] I've tried to make it easier for them to ask help, like encouraged them to say it out loud if they don't know how to do something . . . These kinds of things [mindfulness] has brought, I try to, again, look at things from many sides, and with calmness. (C13)</i>
Redefining "self" as a leader	Leaders develop the idea of the self as a leader, in reference to examining one's attitudes, character, values, motivations, and desires in the leader role.	<i>I see [mindfulness] as developing oneself, psychological growth . . . that's a big difference [compared to other managerial trainings]. . . . This is about how I grow as a person. As being a leader is about being human, and being humane. So it's about what I am like, that's how I work, that influences how I face other people, what my values are in relation to others. So . . . leadership is doing with people. . . . In the end, it's about my own coping and wellbeing. So that you can do the leadership job, it's so demanding, varying, and if you're not ok you cannot do it. (B21)</i>
Other-oriented emotion		
Emotional awareness	Leaders develop the ability to notice emotions in oneself and others.	<i>Of course there may be a situation sometimes which you cannot influence, like when employees are having an argument and there is some schism, and then you become agitated as well . . . So [with the help of mindfulness] already before the situations gets that far and before you get agitated, you should calmly handle it, like, to be more aware of how you behave and why your body is doing this now. (B9)</i>
Emotional self-regulation	Leaders learn to manage their frustrations and automatic emotional reactions proactively.	<i>In the team here, we have some strong personalities, so every now and then, or quite often, comes a situation when I've noticed that [now] I don't say anything so sharply, or that I really think a little about how I should respond, to an email or something. . . . Some of it was . . . well I didn't agree, and that's fine, but now I've thought that I want to process it more on my own, think about what we could do about it, without getting irritated. (E8)</i>
Cultivating positive emotions	Leaders experience positive emotions and foster prosocial emotions, such as connection and kindness.	<i>I've had physical and mental fatigue, so [mindfulness] has given some strength to face those people and be present for them. In my team some have bigger and some have smaller problems, it can be about private life or performance or whatever, I feel that I can listen better now, I can stop, and it doesn't feel so burdening . . . I can take it all in better. I do claim [mindfulness] has helped in that. . . . It is easier to [consciously] find the positive things in the day, and in life. (C14)</i>
Other-oriented behavior		
Communicating thoughtfully	Leaders engage with awareness in verbal and nonverbal communication with others.	<i>I had this challenging discussion with a team member during this training where s/he told me s/he is so fed up with work and considers going on a long sick leave or resign. So I tried to use the mindfulness course learning and said that we can take one step at a time and that everything will work out, we can look at the new systems one at a time and I will arrange some help . . . She's also having a hard time in private life . . . And that team member sent me a message next day and thanked and said the conversation was really good and made her/him think. . . . So this kind of very concrete benefit [from mindfulness]. . . . It was as if I had earned her/his trust, something changed there. (C13)</i>
Facilitating mindful work environment	Leaders act to create a benign workplace to support follower work performance and team functioning.	<i>Now I see also in the leadership how important it is not to multitask and try to avoid this. Sometimes you have to, because there just simply is no other way, but I think that what mindfulness brought to me, the concept that multitasking is not actually good, it's something that distracts your attention, and I realized on myself that . . . it's hard for me to focus when I do more things. I have this high speed . . . but I don't focus . . . and when it comes to the team, I really like all the documents we were given, tips . . . this is good also for the team. (E6)</i>

(HRD) programs that they had attended in the past. Commonly, the focus on the development of self-awareness was seen as a unique feature of mindfulness. One leader stated,

The more I think about it, the more I just can't imagine that we can have leadership courses without talking about mindfulness. . . . Because I have been to very good . . . management courses . . . providing practical tools in terms of, you know, how to do an appraisal talk . . . how to have these confrontational discussions . . . but that, to me, is not really leadership. . . . I mean, you are not leading by telling somebody. You are leading by inspiring people. And how can you inspire people if you are not present and aware? . . . If you're not clear about your own . . . state of mind. So, I guess if people want to learn leadership, they must learn these self-leadership techniques, which are, of course, related to being aware and being mindful, and being in control of your thoughts. (E1)

The learning the leaders had acquired seemed to refine the leaders' expectations of mindfulness, and how they interpret it. The last example illustrates that the leaders found mindfulness assisted an essential role for effective leaders—positively influencing their followers—which culminates in the enhanced presence for and awareness of others.

## Discussion

In this study, we explored how mindfulness can support the development of leaders' other-orientation. The relational aspect of mindfulness is an emerging area of scholarly attention within research on mindfulness in organizations. Within the management learning domain, novel and popular leadership approaches and fashions—such as mindfulness—are considered sociologically significant vehicles for individual and collective learning, as they respond to the demands of the present time (Elkjaer, 2022; Guthey et al., 2022). This study took a qualitative longitudinal intervention approach, by studying the pre-intervention assessments and post-intervention interviews of 62 leaders who participated in an 8-week-long mindfulness training program. The qualitative approach facilitated an open exploration of how leaders perceive mindfulness to manifest in interpersonal workplace relationships across multiple other-oriented dimensions and expressions of mindfulness (Islam et al., 2017). Drawing from the interpersonal and collective conceptualizations of mindfulness (e.g. Badham and King, 2021; Skoranski et al., 2019), the analytical focus of this study was on the leaders' experiences in the context of their followers. The focus on the experiences of leaders who had been offered the opportunity by their organizations to voluntarily participate in a mindfulness training program, and who due to their roles naturally consider organizational, group and individual perspectives, offered valuable insight into how mindfulness is interpreted in organizations (Ihl et al., 2020).

This study provides unique evidence that leaders view mindfulness practice as a transformative experience (du Plessis and Just, 2021) that can influence the development of their other-orientation. The leaders learned that mindfulness practice could help them become better leaders of people through raising their social awareness (Carden et al., 2021; Svalgaard, 2018). Shaping how mindfulness training is understood and defined as a holistic development approach that can build leaders' capacity for social leadership, our work has several implications for theory and practice.

### *Theoretical contributions*

First, our study contributes to the literature on management learning by advancing the understanding of how mindfulness learning and practice foster the development of leaders' social awareness across other-oriented thought, emotion, and behavior. While prior studies have reported leaders' mindfulness practice as having some relational influences (e.g. Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017; Rupprecht et al., 2019), our findings capture the leaders' experiences in the cognitive domain

regarding perceptions and attitudes; in the affective domain involving management of feelings and emotional states; and in the behavioral domain in fostering positive leadership behaviors. The empirical findings of the current study, first and foremost, support the argument that mindfulness is not merely an intra-individual phenomenon but also an interpersonal one expressed in the daily interactions that occur between people (Donald et al., 2019; Skoranski et al., 2019).

Our findings extend those from studies on general populations (e.g. Barnes et al., 2007; Condon et al., 2013; Karremans et al., 2020) by offering empirical insight into a specific work-related relational context, leadership, in which relationships are often non-voluntary and business-like lacking emotional expression (Humphrey et al., 2008). Our study corroborates and extends proposals that the awareness of the self and others, as enhanced by mindfulness, could significantly influence the development of leadership skills in a sustained way (e.g. Hyland et al., 2015). The interviewed leaders learned that simple mindfulness practices, such as taking a few conscious breaths upon transitioning from one work event to another, helped them be more present in the company of their followers. That enhanced presence was beneficial for interactions now guided by giving space to the other, seeking to understand another's perspective, and acting pro-socially. In essence, mindfulness learning and practice seemed to encourage self-reflective observation leading to the development of perceptions and emotions and integrating that understanding into their everyday leadership practices and interaction with followers. Our findings show that mindfulness practice can help leaders develop their performance of key leadership tasks requiring social skill, such as communicating, resolving conflicts between people, and dealing effectively with their reactive emotions in social situations. As Rudolph et al. (2021) note, in times of uncertainty followers rely on their supervisors' support more than ever, and the improvement of leaders' attitudes, values, and behaviors have been listed as key focus areas to be integrated into future leadership development programs. Thus, our study shows that for leaders, mindfulness is a personal and timely vehicle for internalizing the constantly shifting expectations attached to good leadership (Guthey et al., 2022; Rooney et al., 2021; Rostron, 2022). Mindfulness practice can help leaders make sense of their experience and express their other-oriented thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a thoughtful way that better meets the expectations for value-based, ethical leadership norm (Ciulla and Forsyth, 2011; Guthey et al., 2022). Overall, the development indicated by this study is relevant for the individual leader's capacity to be an effective leader in today's global environment marked by constant change, major transformations, and crises that threaten people's well-being, functioning, and sense of safety, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and war (e.g. Antonakis, 2021; Humphrey et al., 2008; Vu and Nguyen, 2022).

Second, our study contributes to the research on relational mindfulness within management and organization studies by clarifying mindfulness as a value-based developmental practice (e.g. Purser, 2018). We found that the leader practitioners do not view mindfulness as a value-neutral cognitive technique (or personal "pocket tool") only to aid staying calm and focused when social situations require (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Karjalainen et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2020; Vu and Burton, 2020). Instead, they viewed the mindfulness practice as facilitating an ongoing transformative personal development process (du Plessis and Just, 2021) closely linked to motivation and taking specific action to improve the relational leadership processes they are key contributors to. It should be acknowledged that our study offers a limited view since we did not inquire second-person views of the followers. As Ihl et al. (2020) point out, different organizational members at different levels are likely to interpret mindfulness practices in different ways. They suggest that a potentially negative influence of collective forms of mindfulness concerns the creation of dysfunctional group dynamics—for instance, when the leader is eager to introduce mindfulness as a team practice. In- and out-groups could be created when some team members are more interested than others in practicing mindfulness with their supervisors and other team members. Nevertheless, this study

shows how leaders view mindfulness to enhance their social awareness and interpersonal functioning, which indicates they interpret mindfulness as an interconnected wisdom practice, rather than as merely a personal stress-reduction and attention-enhancement technique. At best, this interpretation could lead to a more ethical leadership practice, including a thoughtful consideration of those team members who decide to opt out of mindfulness. By indicating that mindfulness can strengthen leaders' capacity to act for the collective good, our findings challenge the predominant emphasis of workplace mindfulness research and practice (e.g. Eby et al., 2019) and aid in re-establishing the interconnected ethical and relational elements of mindfulness feared lost in the adaptations and assessments of mindfulness interventions in corporate settings (e.g. Purser, 2018; Walsh, 2018).

As the third contribution, we provide an understanding of how mindfulness helps leaders build their capacity for other-oriented leadership through a combination of a formal program and leader self-development. We propose that leader-specific mindfulness practice is embedded in the continuous leader self-development process characterized by volition and motivation to develop as a leader (Day and Dragoni, 2015; Day et al., 2021; Reichard and Johnson, 2011; Rosch and Villanueva, 2016; Urrila, 2022). In line with what prior literature indicates, our study shows that while organizational support and resources are needed, to mature as a leader necessitates that the leader takes a reflective stance and voluntarily engages in self-developmental practices (Boyce et al., 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Reichard and Johnson, 2011). Mindfulness practice is expected to raise leaders' awareness of their own values, motivations, and direction, and increase the sense of interconnectedness, and therefore help leaders lead themselves to lead others well (Hunter, 2015). It has been suggested that those trained in contemplative practices would be best equipped to reflect on their own experiences (Davidson and Kazniak, 2015). In connection to Svalgaard's (2018) argument, our findings suggest that active participation in a formal 8-week-long mindfulness training program can indeed be an important developmental stepping-stone to improved and sustained self- and social awareness, as it offers knowledge, expert guidance, and support for independent practice which often takes an informal ("off-the-meditation-seat") form amid dynamic day-to-day social interactions.

Interestingly, the more knowledge the leaders acquired about mindfulness over the course of the program, the less specific and instrumental became the outcomes they expected from it. Our study thus demonstrates how prone mindfulness is to interpretation, and how the interpretation is facilitated by formal programs (Ihl et al., 2020). This places further emphasis on ensuring the quality of instruction (Shonin et al., 2014). Teaching leaders mindfulness practices may support leadership development behaviors such as reflection on leadership experiences and support a person's continuous development to become a better leader. Overall, and departing from the outcome-focused quick fix thinking attached to mindfulness in organizations by many critical voices (e.g. Karjalainen et al., 2021), our study indicates that engaging in mindfulness practice can guide leaders to understand that an 8-week-long training program may be only the beginning of a continuous developmental process toward improved (work) life, enhanced self-awareness, and becoming a more other-oriented leader.

To illustrate the contributions our study makes to literature on management learning, we provide a conceptual framework (see Figure 2) that highlights the potential significance of mindfulness learning to leaders' social leadership capacity and extends understanding of the processes of mindfulness-based leader development. While prior research has examined leader mindfulness interventions with much focus on the outcomes (see Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019) but few references to the processual aspects like antecedents and mechanisms, our framework highlights the pathway with the potential to build leaders' capacity for other-oriented leadership. The antecedents might be the employer commissioning formal mindfulness training for leaders and teams, and the format and delivery of the training program; the mechanism could be active participation in the



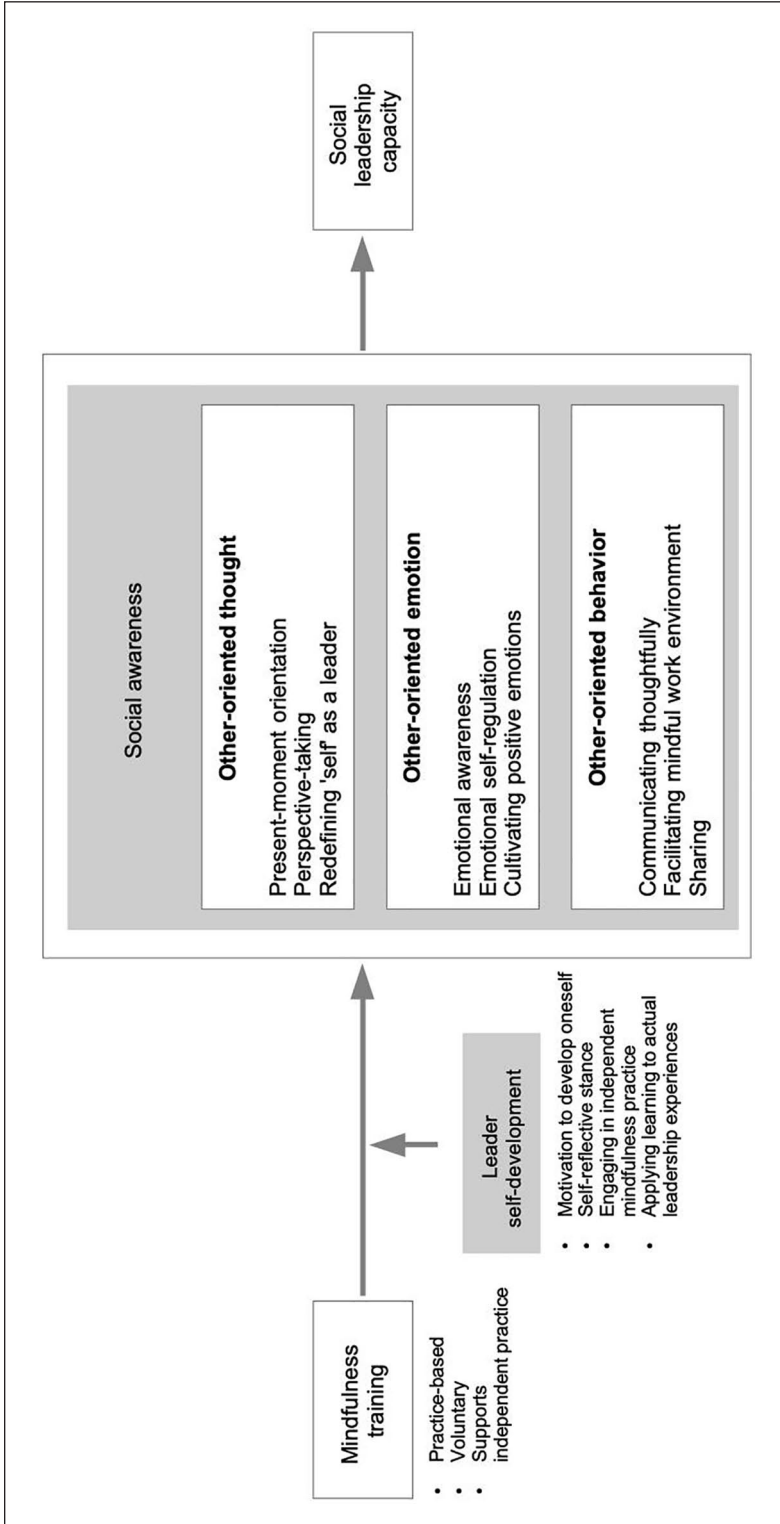


Figure 2. Development of leaders' social awareness through mindfulness training.

training program, developing a personal way of practicing mindfulness, and taking a reflective stance, and ultimately applying learning in the relational, organizational context. Our framework integrates the current knowledge into a coherent whole, guides future research endeavors and acts as a resource for researchers and practitioners alike.

### *Practical implications*

Research on mindfulness in relationships is significant for the practice of leadership, as leadership is relational and takes place in leader–follower interactions (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Good et al., 2016). The current study on mindfulness interventions for leaders has relevance to practice and practitioners, as it examines a continuous and holistic way to enhance learning that occurs as part of the actual work, through interactions between people (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2022; Elkjaer, 2022). It provides valuable information for practicing HR directors and development professionals evaluating and selecting mindfulness-based leader development interventions and instructors. We found mindfulness knowledge and practice strengthened leaders' prosocial intentions regarding followers. The leaders attested that the change was evident in their thoughts and feelings about their followers and their actions toward them. While training leaders in mindfulness appears a viable method to build the social leadership capacity of individual leaders, it remains at the leaders' discretion to decide how to integrate the teachings into their lives to support their personal development and professional relationships. To encourage more leaders and employees to engage in mindfulness, we recommend employers provide staff with information on the individual and interpersonal benefits of the practice. However, it is always worthwhile remembering that participatory organizational interventions are complex processes, and therefore outcomes can vary in different organizations and situations (Simonsen Abildgaard et al., 2020).

This study also has implications for mindfulness instructors. It confirms the need for formalized leader development approaches that address the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of leaders' holistic functioning affecting the development of their social and interpersonal competence at the core of leadership (Liu et al., 2021). The framework developed in this study can serve as a useful resource for practitioners involved in mindfulness who wish to apply new knowledge on this important topic. We recommend that leader-specific elements (such as training in leading people with compassion) and technological tools that help practitioners engage despite tight schedules are built into the design and delivery of mindfulness interventions for leaders.

Finally, our study has implications for the individual leader. Its results indicate that mindfulness training influences the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of human functioning. Those effects are expressed in the relational context with followers, which appears to support the adage that leadership starts from within. The identified enhancements to leadership ability are connected to human psychological processes that evolve over time (Day et al., 2014, 2021). Consequently, to reap sustained benefits capable of spanning various areas of life (i.e. well-being, work productivity, inner growth, and relationships), practitioners should see a formal mindfulness training program as a starting point. We would suggest they establish regular, independent mindfulness practice beyond the formal intervention context.

### *Limitations and future research*

Despite its strengths (pre-/post-intervention design, rich interview material and large sample), this study has some limitations, which should inspire future studies. First, we did not measure changes in predefined variables. Instead, we openly probed the subjective experiences of the leaders by utilizing a qualitative pre–post design (Goldman-Schuyler et al.; Varela and Shear, 1999).

We provided insights into the key domains of leaders' social awareness and presented them as a conceptual framework. We acknowledge that the elements within this framework are related. For instance, behavior may be seen as an expression of thoughts and emotions (Gill, 2011), but we did not focus on assessing the relationships between those elements. In the future, connections between the attentional, affective, and behavioral elements could be investigated. Another option would be a deep dive into any of the above areas, for instance exploring the sustained behavioral changes might offer valuable insights into the processes of leader mindfulness. Future research might also investigate the broader implications for the workplace climate, for instance, if practicing mindfulness enhances human flourishing at work (Arch and Landy, 2015).

Second, we did not assess second-person perspectives such as those of followers. This study focused on revealing the subjective experience of leaders and their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. We acknowledge that personal interviews focusing on individuals' perceptions of themselves in relation to others could be subject to halo effects, meaning that the enhanced social behaviors of the interviewees may, for instance, be over-emphasized when the behavior is self-reported, as opposed to being assessed by another person (Donaldson and Grant-Vallone, 2002). However, the information from leaders on their mental and behavioral processes presented by the current analysis could be obtained only by studying the leaders' first-person accounts (e.g. Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017). Future research might qualitatively examine followers' attitudes, emotions, and behaviors (a considerable time) after they and/or their leaders attend mindfulness training. Future research could also explore how team mindfulness (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018) develops as a result of leader mindfulness training.

Third, the focus of this study was on the leaders' experiences described by them immediately after the mindfulness training. We would encourage investigations of the long-term relational impacts of mindfulness training on leadership through a longitudinal design (Davidson and Kazniak, 2015). Follow-up interviews or surveys could be conducted 6 and 12 months, or even several years, after the intervention.

Fourth, the potential limitations of the research setting should be considered. Participation in the research intervention was, as is typical of mindfulness programs, voluntary (Davidson and Kazniak, 2015). The self-selecting participants know that they are attending a mindfulness intervention, which could lead to self-selection bias (the leaders who are motivated could be different from another kind of leader population) and demand bias (the participants' expectation affects their experience) (Davidson and Kazniak, 2015). Participants in mindfulness interventions who perceive the experience positively may be more enthusiastic about taking part in research than those who had a negative experience (Rupperecht et al., 2019). We did not inquire experiences of people who did not enroll to a mindfulness course in the first place or who dropped out at some point. Instead, this study focuses on leaders who did participate in the training and who wanted to share their experience. While the informants' motivation to learn about mindfulness may affect that they report about their experience in a positive way, the participants' willingness to dedicate their time to mindfulness practice is an important antecedent of mindfulness (Davidson and Kazniak, 2015). Furthermore, female participants dominated the population of the current study, which is perhaps telling of the popularity of workplace mindfulness among women. Future studies might balance potential biases by seeking the view of individuals who did not agree to be interviewed or who dropped out from the program, constructing samples with equal numbers of female and male informants, and exploring the obstacles to imparting the value of mindfulness.

Finally, workplace mindfulness interventions are heterogeneous in terms of length and intensity, and often tailored according to the requirements of the purchasing organization. Both the content and context of the intervention may influence the results (Bartlett et al., 2019). The current research intervention did not have a particular emphasis, for instance, on stress-reduction or spirituality

(King and Badham, 2020; Shonin and Van Gordon, 2015). The heterogeneity of the different mindfulness programs available and not being able to control how individuals practice what they learn complicate comparison (Davidson and Kazniak, 2015), but supports the assessment of their effectiveness in ways that can accommodate accounts of subjective experiences as we have done. In the current research intervention, regular home practice was encouraged, which is an important element of mindfulness interventions (Davidson and Kazniak, 2015). The participants' experiences may have been different had the participants not been provided support and a mobile application to encourage independent practice. Practicing mindfulness is a personal and contextual choice that practitioners independently make (Vu and Gill, 2018), as described by our interviewees. Because the results of organizational interventions are "products of multiple intervention mechanisms interacting with the specific organizational contexts" (Simonsen Abildgaard et al., 2020: 1340), future studies might address the context of the intervention.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how leaders perceive mindfulness learning to foster their other-orientation as a leader. Our findings illustrate the development of their social awareness in three interlinked domains of human functioning—the cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Our research highlights that the examination of mindfulness in relation to others concerns not only an individual's personal gain, like well-being and attention-enhancement, but their enhanced other-orientation; intention to do well by others, to respond wisely, and act responsibly. One of the key messages of this study is that leaders recognize that an 8-week-long training program may be only beginning of a continuous journey toward enhanced self-awareness and becoming a more socially aware leader. Based on our findings, we propose that mindfulness influences how people understand and learn about what might constitute good and wise leadership (Guthey et al., 2022; Rooney et al., 2021). In conclusion, our research implies that training leaders in mindfulness could unleash beneficial relational value and improve their capacity for leading others in a sustained way. To build on this research, we encourage management learning scholars to continue the investigation of mindfulness as an interpersonal organizational phenomenon.

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