



Fit to lead? It's in the mind

The state of the executive body and mind are increasingly valuable corporate currency. Wellness programmes are more than ever woven into everyday executive life. Fitness of mind is the new priority. For a growing number it comes packaged in a 2500 year-old box of tricks called mindfulness. By **Reg Birchfield**.

To cope with today's portfolio of management and leadership pressures, executives must be match-fit according to contemporary best practice thought. Individuals see it similarly. It is a complex and competitive world out there. Success, therefore, is increasingly defined by an individual's ability to deliver under stressful and demanding conditions.

Motivated managers readily relate to the call for physical fitness, but selling them on mind building concepts takes more convincing. Concepts like "mental fitness" are, said *The Economist's* columnist Schumpeter, "bound to attract charlatans and snake-oil salesmen". And US leadership guru Warren Bennis agrees the new "science" of neuroleadership is "filled with banalities". These cautions make it easy for the disinclined to dismiss practices like mindfulness, for example, on semantic rather than scientific or evaluated grounds.

Individual resistances notwithstanding, there is a growing body of both opinion and research that links personal performance to the interconnections between both a healthy body and equally tuned mind. There is also a growing appreciation that, as the world and its accompanying technological, social, organisational, political and economic structures, practices and priorities change, so the mind and how we use it to lead and manage must keep pace.

Mindfulness is an age-old concept rooted in Buddhist meditation. Modern western psychology defines it as bringing the individual's "complete attention to the present on a moment-by-moment basis", out of which comes an enhanced capacity to use the mind to greater specific and nonjudgmental effect.

The objective of meditation is to clear the mind of the everyday jangle and clutter of thoughts that are constantly on the move or in conflict. The practitioner submits to concentrating (samadhi) on exclusively present moment activities such as breathing (anapanasati – mindfulness of breathing). Cleared of all other distractions, the mind focuses exclusively on what is happening "now" and opens up to

clarity, awareness and insights into the way things really are (vipassana).

Dr John Kabat-Zinn, for example, founded his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programme at the University of Massachusetts in 1979 to treat the chronically ill. The medical profession now increasingly accepts the relationship between mind state and recuperative medical outcomes.

Simply put, mindfulness is about developing skills to control and focus personal concentration. Its application has evolved from the spiritual, medical and stress management worlds to become a workplace tool for individual, team and organisational leadership and change.

Maya Nova is the founder of Auckland-based consultancy Mindbalance which provides "mindfulness and meditation training for improved productivity, resilience and wellbeing". Mindful leadership is, she says, "about going beyond the hierarchical, conservative [organisational] models into adaptive, intuitive and cooperative leadership".

Her embrace of Buddhism about 10 years ago sparked a personal interest in the power and clarity of thought that came with meditation. Then, as she explored the relationship between the work-life pressures confronting leaders and managers and her own experience of the benefits of meditation, she moved into what is for her a new career built, serendipitously, on a decade's personal application.

"We live in stressful times of unsettling change and challenge," she says. "Whether we see these challenges only as a crisis or as an opportunity to develop new models of how we live, work and trade in the world will depend on the kind of future leadership we foster," says Nova, a Serb who saw her share of social and political wretchedness before coming to New Zealand with her former Kiwi husband.

But what does mindfulness do for leaders?

In the practical sense, Nova defines mindfulness as the capacity to be fully and clearly aware of what is going on in the present moment, without distortion. "It is defined by clarity, calmness and insight,"

she says. The individual in a mindful or meditative state is aware of what is going on but stripped for the moment of judgement, prejudice, fear, beliefs and other pre-conditioned thought screens. "It teaches us to trust and surrender to our ability to become clearly aware as a way for solutions to reveal themselves, rather than violently rummaging through our mind looking for answers and ways to fix things," she adds.

Mindful leaders are, she says, intuitive, creative, honest, wise, compassionate and "deeply resonant with" the constantly changing needs and demands of the workplace and surrounding environment. "Mindful leaders are able to navigate complexity with the flexibility of insight and leadership presence," says Nova.

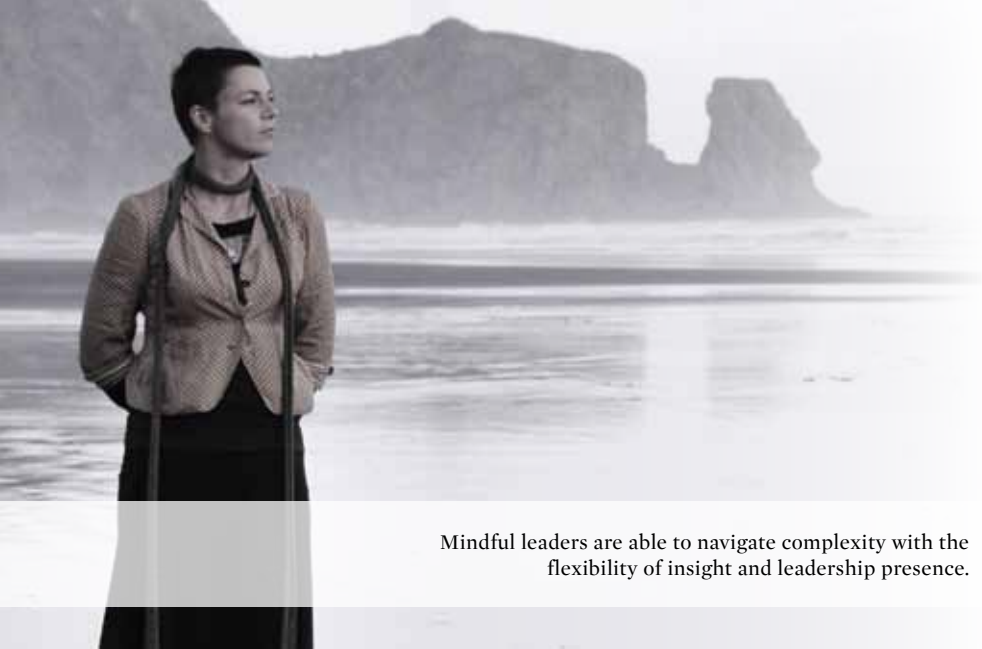
As compelling as that sounds, sceptics are likely to see it at best as another faddish leadership or management practice or worse, the snake oil of which *The Economist* warns.

"Mindfulness is grounded in sound research, particularly in the field of neuroscience," counters Nova. "It also has a 2000-plus year history of application which delivers results that are now making their way into many different facets of our existence – most obviously in medicine and stress management."

Mindfulness is less concerned with tools, skill sets, knowledge and past experience and is more about the ability to access, at will, an individual's natural leadership qualities. "It provides leaders with access to deep and honest self awareness," says Nova. "It tells them if they are on track and learning to observe impartially and with both internal and external wisdom. It bypasses mental ruts and other habitual, unexamined responses to challenges such as fear, anger, arrogance, set belief systems and so on."

Nova concedes mindfulness does not come easily. "The ability to stay fully in the moment and respond appropriately to the situation unfolding before you requires self mastery," she warns. "But it is consistent with the natural leadership quality of pursuing excellence."

Leadership writer and thepracticeofleadership.net website promoter George



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Ambler calls mindfulness one of the most powerful but difficult leadership practices to master. But it is, he thinks, critical for navigating uncertainty, dealing with and understanding change and managing leadership crises.

Self awareness, an acknowledged valuable leadership attribute, is the pearl mindfulness delivers those willing to plumb the depths of their own minds. Self knowledge, according to Ambler, helps leaders to make choices about how to respond to people and situations. “Deep knowledge about yourself enables you to be consistent, to present yourself authentically, as you are,” he says. “We trust – and follow – people who are real, who are consistent, whose behaviour, values and beliefs are aligned. We trust people we do not constantly have

to second guess.”

In their 2005 book *Resonant Leadership*, American academics Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee said that when executives were faced with extreme organisational turbulence, mindfulness came into its own. “You need more, rather than less, information, and it is generally more difficult to get [when things are going badly]. You need to leverage your strengths and find those people who are succeeding despite disruptions. You need to stay calm,” they wrote. “And mindfulness starts with self-awareness.”

Is mindfulness innate? “Yes,” says Nova, “but it doesn’t appear to be because our habit of mindlessness is so pervasive. Observe babies and you can see that mindfulness is innate. Mindlessness is a habit we develop. But whatever the case,

embracing it is a choice we make similar to ones we make when we quit bad habits. We choose to become fit, eat greens or drink less alcohol. The benefits that come from being mindful far outweigh the deterrents. Not making those choices can significantly diminish an individual’s potential for self realisation, prosperity and wellbeing,” she argues.

Individuals can teach themselves meditation. But, Nova warns, “it’s a bit like going to a gym and not knowing how to use the machines, or learning a musical instrument on your own. Mindfulness should be cultivated and practised in context with someone who can teach the techniques and answer the questions that naturally arise.”

The training is fairly simple. The difficulty is all in the mind. “The mind doesn’t really multi-task,” she says. “It is either present and here or distracted and otherwise engaged. The mind is a rather unruly student and needs lots of patience, encouragement and reward. Thankfully, the rewards are natural to the process of quieting the mind.”

What seems increasingly apparent is that, whatever processes deliver it, leaders and managers must become more adept at bending their minds to more effectively solving some heady problems if the world is to emerge as a happier and healthier place in the next 25 years. **M**

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