

Today, disruptions to organisations and individual lives are accelerating due to developments in technology, economic restructuring, environmental degradation, and even geopolitics. Successful leaders must respond adaptively to such disruptions. Responsible leaders want also to help others cope with these disruptions. Adaptive responses are required precisely when your impulse is to fight, freeze or flee.

To explore such challenges, the Royal Society of the Arts (UK) co-organised a talk and panel discussion on mindfulness for leadership. I presented this talk to introduce Strategic Awareness.

The term Strategic Awareness describes the form of Mindfulness that helps leaders of organisations adapt and respond appropriately. It was developed by Prof Juan Humberto Young at IE, in Madrid. It is a distinctive feature of IE's Executive Master in Positive Leadership, Strategy and Transformation programme. Juan is an experienced senior corporate executive who has led strategy and finance teams for Movenpick, UBS and others. He has conducted workshops in Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training (or MB-'SAT') for corporate teams and individuals. Juan has also integrated MBSAT into corporate Strategy Formulation exercises for companies like Oracle and CISCO - since Strategy-making benefits when teams are in more mindful states.

The MBSAT builds upon the empirically-validated protocols from MBSR and MBCT used in clinical settings. You may have heard of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy programmes. To help leaders develop further and flourish, Juan has artfully integrated insights from Positive Psychology, Behavioral Decision Theory and Evolutionary Leadership with Mindfulness.

The other partner for the event was the Mindfulness Initiative at Singapore Management University. Its Director, Professor Jochen Reb is the author of Mindfulness in Organisations - the first academic book specifically on mindfulness at the workplace, published by Cambridge University Press. Jochen has studied mindfulness in organizations for many years. Among others, he has found that mindful individuals perform better in negotiations. And also that the employees of more mindful leaders are more satisfied with their jobs and also perform better.

Mindfulness is experiential. To merely talk about it conceptually would be like trying to convey the taste of a spicy chilli pepper to someone who has never tasted one. Thus, I also led some Mindfulness practices at the event. The evening's panel discussion involved expert practitioners on innovation, resilience, mindfulness training and coaching. You can watch highlights of that panel discussion. The video can be found at the Mindfulness Initiative's website.

We begin with 2 questions. What is mindfulness? And how is it relevant to leadership?

The term Mindfulness can be used to describe a state, an intervention, a practice or a trait. We may vividly perceive an experience without being able to reproduce that **state**. We may not be able to explain why we were so mindful for that period of time. At other times, we may stop for a few slow breaths as an **intervention** whenever we need to think and act more calmly. We may even set aside some time each day to **practice** paying attention to our emotions, thoughts and impulses - and especially to our breathing. If we **practice regularly - and use appropriate interventions whenever needed** - those around us may notice that we have transformed - and that we are developing the **trait** of mindfulness.

Mindfulness safeguards decision-making from being drenched by the 'obscurations'. These obscurations include cognitive biases, arbitrary preferences and emotional hijacking. Initially mindfulness practice acts like a **Towel**. Over time, it **protects like a Raincoat**.

A point that bears repeating: **Your experience of practice should be enjoyable and non-judging**. Let's use Yoga as a metaphor. A less-skilful yoga teacher might say "touch your toes". At this point you either can - or cannot - touch your toes. The teacher's words activated your striving, achievement-focused mode. A more skilful master might say, "move your chest towards your thighs, and notice what you experience". This would put you in a curious mode. You would notice whether the tightness was in your calves, your back or in your hamstrings. Instead of focusing on achievement, you would become more familiar with how your body works - and in time develop greater awareness and control. It's the same with mindfulness. For example, instead of aiming to remain focussed on your breath - and being frustrated when your mind wanders to certain thoughts - you could tell yourself to gently bring your mind back to your breath. Enjoy becoming familiar with your own mind and its tendencies. Just as we seek to be compassionate and loving to others, we should treat ourselves with gentleness and kindness.

The returns from investing in mindfulness improve with practice. The proven benefits (such as lower stress, better attention and life-satisfaction) increase - while the amount of time and effort required decreases. Neuroscience shows that practice results in greater plasticity. Neuroplasticity helps us continue learning throughout life. Plasticity perfectly describes how mindfulness works. When you pull something elastic, it stretches and when you release the tension, it reverts to its original shape. But when you stretch something that is endowed with plasticity (like a muscle and its surrounding fascia), it will expand and grow - provided you pull slowly enough that it doesn't crack or tear. And over time it will retain



this new, healthy shape - even after the tension is relaxed.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was right to say “A mind once stretched, (...) never returns to its original dimensions.”

It is not just individuals who benefit. Jochen Reb, Director of the Mindfulness Initiative at Singapore Management University has found that more mindful leaders are being experienced by their employees as treating them with more respect. This leads to better leader-member exchange relations.

Beyond employees, the well-being of your close associates also improves because of your mindfulness practice! I believe mindfulness should be part of the training of all MBA and MPA students, executives and leaders in all organisations. Why shouldn't managers and public administrators also contribute to societal well-being – especially if it also improves organisational outcomes?

Ray Dalio, billionaire founder and chief investment officer of Bridgewater Associates was interviewed by Father Laurence Freeman. Fr Freeman is a leading practitioner of Christian Mantra Meditation. Ray Dalio explained that he started meditating because the Beatles were doing it! He says it changed his life. It gave him inner energy and the creativity which results from quietness. Ray Dalio stressed that "Meditation, more than anything in his life, was the biggest factor of whatever success he has had."

He is **not** the only successful Corporate leader to recommend mindfulness. Microsoft's Bill Gates, as well as Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff and LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner say meditation contributed to their success.

How does the Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training (or MB-'SAT') enhance the performance of leaders in organisations?

Firstly, Mindfulness practice helps us Regain ambidexterity of the mind

In the popular RSA animate video titled The Divided Brain, Ian McGilchrist argues that our brains can operate in 2 modes - Open awareness and narrow awareness. Albert Einstein presaged McGilchrist's argument by remarking that "the intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant". The often-repeated lament is that we have created a society that honours the servant but has forgotten the gift.

Schooling and professional life can emphasise conceptual thinking, busyness, striving, and acquiring an expert view based on past successes. The alternative modes are neglected and atrophy from disuse. We need to regain many of the facilities we had as children. For example, how to stop and smell the flowers. Or how to embrace curiosity, and adopt a beginner's mind that is centred in the present. This allows us to sense disrupted contexts as they actually are, not through the lens of some outdated mental model. We need to create pauses between stimulus and response in our daily lives - so that we can take more intentional decisions and actions.

Traditional Mindfulness protocols like MBSR and MBCT begin by enhancing non-judging, present-centred awareness. Over this foundation, the MBSAT approach for leaders emphasises discerning, future-oriented decision-making and action. This is a key aspect of Strategic Awareness.

So what does Strategic Awareness look like in action?

Steve Callaghan was sailing solo across the Atlantic Ocean. He had designed his sailing vessel, the Napoleon Solo, with separate air-tight compartments in the hull. This would reduce the chances of sinking after a collision. Steve had prepared a survival kit to use on his inflatable life raft if he was forced to abandon his boat. The survival kit had solar stills to desalinate sea-water, food rations, a spear gun to catch fish when food ran out, medicines and flares to attract attention.

The hull of the Napoleon Solo was smashed one night as Steve Callaghan slept. He suspects he was hit by a whale. Steve had no time to collect his survival kit. He barely had time to activate and board his inflatable life raft before he was submerged with his sailboat's cabin.

Despite standing in the lulling 'safety' of his life-raft just minutes after his ordeal had started, Steve Callaghan became acutely aware that he would not survive for long without the survival kit. He knew in the back of his mind that his chances of being rescued by a merchant ship were slim as he was not located near the major shipping lanes.

In the wet, dark night, Steve Callaghan had a realisation - that he would have to dive back into the sinking Napoleon Solo to retrieve his survival kit. Steve would survive floating adrift in his life raft the next 76 days (that's 2 and a half months!) before being rescued - thanks to that survival kit.

Those initial moments at the start of the 76 days were crucial.



Steve Callaghan assessed clearly the situation as it unfolded, decided what was needed to survive, and harnessed his intense fear to do it.

In his book “Deep Survival – Who Lives, Who Dies and Why”, Laurence Gonzalez studies mountaineers who were trapped in snowstorms, forest fire fighters, US Navy pilots who land planes on aircraft carriers in pitch darkness - and sailors like Steve Callaghan, who have survived after being cast adrift at sea..

According to Gonzalez, when disruption or disaster strikes, one can feel lost.

Gonzalez writes, “Being lost, is not a location ... It is a failure of the mind. It can happen in the woods or it can happen in life. ...not being lost is (...) a decision not to be lost wherever you happen to find yourself. It is simply saying, “I’m not lost, I’m right here.”

Apparently 10-year olds can do this. If you ask whether they are lost, a 10-year-old would reply “My Father is lost. I’m right here”

“Zen mind. Beginner’s mind.”

However, Leaders don’t only manage disasters and disruptions. They operate in contexts that range from the familiar and controllable, to the unfamiliar and chaotic.

Where we can forecast the future based on expertise, we could take steps to innovate and build the organisational capabilities that will be needed in future. Accurate forecasting and deciding what responses are required, are both enhanced through mindfulness.

The future seldom unfolds in a linear way that can be forecasted. I have worked with gifted scenario planners who know this.. They develop multiple plausible scenarios to reveal and address the blind spots and obscurations of decision-makers. Steps can then be taken to prepare for these scenarios. For example, instead of pursuing a particular innovation, investments can be made in growing innovation capability in a few likely areas and encouraging a pro-innovation culture. Besides **predicting**, leaders and people in the organisation are **preparing** by creating Mindful Real Options - MROs in the language of MBSAT. Besides identifying opportunities, a leader may make pack a survival kit in anticipation of possible disasters.

But as Steve Callaghan’s ordeal shows us, real life can disrupt the best contingency plans.

When disruptions render mental models and approaches that worked previously inappropriate, leaders need the resilience that comes from stillness and letting solutions emerge ... This requires the beginner’s mind that Steve Callaghan displayed. Harnessing your strong emotions and being familiar with your own biases and mental models enhances your adaptability to respond appropriately in the new situation.

The central intervention in MBSAT is Minding your BETA. BETA is an acronym Bodily Sensations, Emotions, Thoughts and Action Impulses. This sequence for directing your self-awareness is very effective. Minding your BETA consists of first Capturing or becoming aware of the state of your BETA – without judging it or trying to change it. This is similar to the traditional ‘body scan’ in MBSR and MBCT. The next stage is to Even Out or regulate any overpowering aspects of your BETA by focusing on your breathing. Breathing is a special point of focus in mindfulness because it is very very sensitive to your BETA – and your BETA is very sensitive to your breathing. The third stage is to Open Up yourself to new strategic options or possibilities for responding. With the inner energy released from the first 2 stages, you can choose to focus on ‘leaning into’ a challenge rather than avoiding or denying it.

The three stages of Capturing, Evening-out and Opening Up can be remembered with the acronym CEO. After all being CEO of our own BETA is excellent preparation for becoming CEO of any organisation!

One specific exercise you can do in the third stage involves generating feelings of appreciation and compassion – firstly for friends, followed by people you have neutral feelings for, and finally for a specific colleague or business partner who you feel some aversion to. I found one week of practising this to be very useful for working with certain hyper-competitive peers!

Mindfulness practice should be pleasant and energising – and the returns increase over time. Practice amplifies your awareness and leads to more skilful decision-making for both your professional as well as your personal life. It also enhances your relations with others.

As Juan Humberto Young says, “these skills are not free and they are not for sale. You must practice – and that’s what makes them precious”.