



# Mindful Leadership in Action: Finding focus in a deluge of distractions...

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

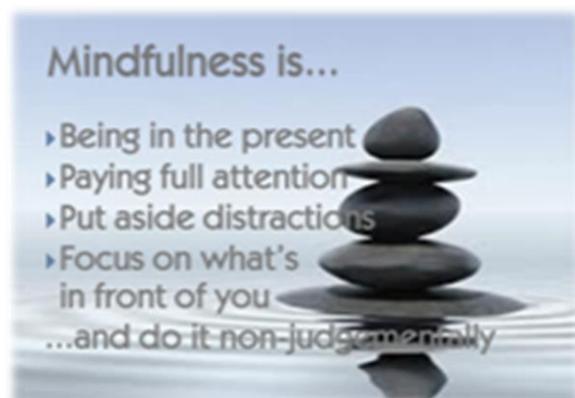
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Last year, I had the opportunity to run an extended series of Putting Patients First clinics in a number of different Brisbane-based and rural hospitals. During those sessions, I found myself writing up the same key-word over and over again: **Mindfulness**.

Mindfulness wasn't exactly a new concept to me. Medical mindfulness has lead the way with brain-training and University of Massachusetts Medical School has run its well-known Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program for many years. But in the wake of widely-influential leadership concepts like Personal Mastery (one of Peter Senge's 5 Learning Disciplines), Emotional Intelligence, popularised by Daniel Goleman, and a venerably long Buddhist tradition...

## ...Mindfulness seems to have slipped into the mainstream.

A raft of recent neuroscience discoveries show how mindfulness-training can rewire key brain areas connected with attention, focus, compassion and calming. Mindfulness is practised in a growing number of organisations world-wide and studies show that it's just plain healthy, which is good news for business leaders keen to improve their ability to sustain attention, heighten 'presence' and handle stress – with the added bonus of improved health and well-being thrown-in!



We define mindfulness as being able to focus on whatever you're doing right now. You put-aside distractions and give your full attention to whatever's unfolding right in front of you.

Amidst the busyness, pace and pressure of modern workplaces, mindfulness isn't a practice you regularly encounter all that much – you're more likely to see stress and distractedness. Yet it's key to leadership self-awareness: to being more fully in control of our feelings, thoughts and actions, and to maintaining focus, a clear mind and emotional balance.

Cultivating mindfulness through targeted brain-training exercises can help leaders develop more focus, clarity, self-control, resilience and compassion rather than just reacting on auto-pilot all the time. When

you think of the tremendous challenges leaders face today – a continuous culture of rush ‘n hurry, creeping complexity, toxic workplaces, ambiguous problems with no easy answers – it’s easier to see why a bit more mindfulness may be useful to help navigate turbulent workplace terrains. More than ever before, leaders can get lost in a maze of data-driven overload that can undercut efforts to be mindful much of the time. Techno-connectivity has revolutionised the way we live and work.

## A State of Continuous Partial Distraction...

But in this hyper-heated, techno-connective business climates, it can seem as if we’re drowning in a deluge of digital distractions: a dazzling array of devices that keep us connected but also creates anxiety, social disconnection and an incessant barrage of information that leads to more overload and less, not more, certainty.

If you’re like the rest of us, we seem to occupy a mental space that Linda Stone (a former executive at Apple and Microsoft) has described as *“a state of continuous partial attention”*. *Developing presence and focus through mindfulness begins by realizing just how much time we spend in a permanently distracted state. In a continuously-connected environment, we’re bombarded by constant interruptions – email alerts, texts, face-book updates, outlook meeting notices, phone calls – from the time we get up in the morning ‘til the time we go to bed at night.*

- So many devices demand our attention – they ring, beep, ping and sing. The chime of incoming e-mail takes your mind off writing a strategy paper, the beeping of your washing machine reminds you that hanging out the clothes is more important than hanging out with the kids!
- With all the distractions, it’s remarkable we get anything done let alone find enough quiet space to be mindful. It’s hard enough to connect with them, far less our inner-selves. But all these interruptions take their toll: there are very few moments where we can concentrate fully on the tasks in front of us. We know it’s a social problem, when governments have to pass laws against texting and driving.
- Take a few moments to sit still and watch people on the footpath, in restaurants, in the hallway at work. It might give you a sense of the disconnection pandemic that accompanies digital distraction and so called multi-tasking. You notice people texting, tweeting, face-booking as they walk, narrowly avoiding gutters, traffic, signs, walls and other people also buried in their techno-distractions. It’s even acceptable now to do this in the middle of a conversation or at lunch with someone.
- It’s a global epidemic. Of a thousand drivers surveyed injured in accidents, more than half said their minds wandered just beforehand. To top that, thousands of people a year are admitted to emergency departments due to text-n-walk accidents.
- If you don’t believe it, distract yourself for a minute. Google YouTube ‘accidents while texting and walking’. But please do it while not walking or driving!



## Leaders Finding Focus

Against this new work landscape, leaders are looking for ways to still put in a peak performance without succumbing to such pressures. In his latest book on *Focus*, Daniel Goleman says one of the main tasks of

leaders is directing the attention of others to the right things – especially difficult with society's creeping disconnection in an age of incessant digital connectivity. But before leaders can help others become more mindful, they need to learn how to put aside distraction themselves and focus their own attention.

Achieving more presence and focus through mindfulness begins by recognising just how much time we spend in what we'd rather call a 'state of continuous partial distraction' Our minds are full-to-bursting with all manner of thoughts, feelings, wishes, and worries. A big part of being mindful is seeing how they actually prevent us being present. But it's not a matter of blanking-out thoughts. It's about learning to control them.

## Mindfulness minus Meditation?

A good deal of the literature and on-line content I've seen seems to consider mindfulness in the context of meditation, yoga retreats and spirituality. I'm rather drawn to the idea, however, that you don't need to meditate per se to be mindful.

- While research shows meditation is certainly a very effective path to it, mindfulness does not have to involve lengthy and rigorous meditation routines.
- Nor does it mean retreating into a meditative huddle or 'omming' around work serenely, wearing a saffron-coloured tie.
- Mindfulness is a natural quality of attention and focus that all of us can bring into our everyday work-life. It doesn't have to entail sitting still on a cushion with incense burning in the background.
- But it does require the ability to achieve a mental stillness of sorts that many leaders fear, since it implies not doing things. Any kind of meditation, including mindfulness, is about the discipline of retraining your brain for attention.



'Neuro-plasticity' is a pretty well-known term these days: how our brain re-shapes according to what we do (or don't do) with it. New neurons are attracted to whatever part of the brain we use to strengthen it. It's a bit like going to the gym to develop muscles.

Whatever methods you use – plus or minus meditation – you still need to train your brain by doing mental exercises that make you and your brain re-mould your circuitry for more focus, presence and attention rather than just react on auto-pilot all the time.

There are many ways to build mindfulness practice into your working-week without having to set aside time for traditional meditation. Building on our work in the areas of [Personal Mastery](#), [Emotional Intelligence](#), [Conversational Coaching](#) and [Compassionate Leadership](#) over the past 10+plus years, our latest program – [Mindful Leadership in Action](#) – is about just that.

The aim of this 1-day 'brain-training' clinic is to help leaders discover everyday ways to incorporate mindfulness, minus-meditation, and still train your brain to be **more focused, present and attentive**. If you're looking for ways to enhance the quality of your leadership actions and sharpen your focus and thinking capacity, Mindful Leadership in Action may provide a pertinent platform for you... Perhaps I'll see you at one of my clinics?

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