

Mindfulness, A Foundation for Authenticity

Increasing Your Awareness as a Leader

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“If you can learn to make the mind still, it will be the greatest help to the world.”

-Ajahn Chah

Authenticity. This word struck a chord in me at work as I began writing my Toastmaster’s speech. I had repeatedly sought financial security in a job and subsequently found the job to lack importance and meaning. Performing a job that had no meaning to me was incongruent with what I needed in each waking moment. Becoming a parent only magnified the internal split I felt between my home life and my work life. What appeared as success on the outside had become, once again, soul crushing. I longed for authenticity in my career, a career that would allow me to be present for my sons and providing for my family. In becoming a parent my values shifted and my integrity as a leader became a higher priority. I struggled to find a way to release the chains that bound me. I wanted to demonstrate to our sons that it is possible to follow your passion in life and be happy. It was important to me to be a role model for the next generation and beyond. It was also important to me to be happy and end a pattern of multigenerational suicide.

With some outside guidance and permission, I followed my passions and pursued coaching as a profession. I trusted that being happy was worth the risk of stepping out of a cushy six figure job. This took courage to take a leap of faith. Leaving my corporate job, letting go of our dream house, pulling our children from an ideal private school to pursue a higher level of education with my husband felt like we were course correcting with exciting possibilities for personal freedom and happiness. It required great effort to change everything and launch authentic careers, but we did it. Even with meaningful work and success, I still ask myself, “Am I living my authentic life? Am I being true to self? Does my life honor my true nature? Do I trust that life will guide me along this authentic path?” I am constantly learning about myself exploring authenticity and wholeness to feel joy in each moment and live a happy fulfilling life. Stepping into the unknown with trust enables me to encourage you to honor your highest self and live an authentic life.

Does authenticity strike a chord in you? Have you achieved a level of success in life that others admire and yet you question whether you are on the right path? What are you longing for now? Are you being true to your highest self? Are you being guided by your true nature? Do you consider yourself to be an authentic leader? Do your behaviors match your values? Have your values shifted? Have you pivoted to stay on track with your current set of values? Are you inspired by your work, your life and those around you? Are you seeking more life fulfillment,

wholeness, authenticity, or happiness? If you feel a chasm between your current role and who you aspire to be, this writing will speak to you and compel you to take action by stepping into life more fully to become more authentically *you*.

Here, you will learn how to develop the awareness that forms the foundation of an authentic leader. You will learn how to stay in alignment with your values to reach a place of wholeness where work and life are seamless. Living and leading an authentic life means acting in accordance with your values at all times as best as you can. You are not perfect, neither am I. Such is life on Planet Earth, we stumble and fall, we learn and grow. This is your playground to practice being authentic. You are evolving and so are your values. Are you keeping up with what is important to you now and prioritizing your actions based on your current values?

A Leader's Struggle

You attend meeting after meeting with little time to reflect or plan. You get pulled in many directions by staff, superiors, suppliers, board members, investors, and family members. Without having a way to access your higher self and your inner wisdom, you are often running on empty; exhausted, depleted. You need a method to recharge, slow down and take a breath. In this moment right now, ask yourself, "Am I leading as my authentic self or am I wearing a mask and simply trying to fit someone else's expectation of the role I am in?" If you feel split and not whole, how do you draw forth authenticity in yourself to be in the highest relationship with others? Be still, reflect and make more conscious choices.

Why is an authentic leader's foundation built on awareness?

One of the most important behaviors that I have found that is needed in leaders is the ability to listen. To be fully present with another human being is a skill that can be developed. Those closest to you will benefit as you enhance this skill. Listening might be an act you have taken for granted. It sounds easy enough, close your mouth and take in what the other person is saying. If it were this easy, why then is listening one of the most common areas of growth in leaders? From my work as an executive coach having performed a large number of 360 degree interviews, listening is a common area for growth. Mindfulness is a pathway to become a better listener.

Consider the demands on you as a leader throughout your day. Free time to reflect is likely just out of reach most days. How do you clear the mind from one meeting to be fully present in the next?

In an authentic leader's mind, thoughts of the past and thoughts of the future can be put aside to be immersed fully in the present moment. I view this ability as a superpower, allowing you as a leader to be focused on the person or situation in front of you. Being able to shift gears moment to moment and listen with an open heart and open mind is a skill that can be developed through mindful dedicated practice. You may find, as I have, that developing a personal mindfulness

awareness practice is a foundational skill every leader can use to enhance authenticity in work and life. Can you be a superhero on Planet Earth with superpowers? Why not?

Mindfulness practice, or meditation, can be explained quite simply. Picture a lake churned up by the wind. The water appears brown and opaque, with sediment muddying visibility. The thinking mind is often discursive, moving topic to topic, similar to the sediment swirling around in the water. Now imagine a calm clear lake where you can see all the way to the bottom. A calm and clear mind is like the lake without wind. When your mind is clear, unattached, without judgement, you can see clearly all the way to the bottom of the “mind lake” and observe what is happening in the present moment. You are prepared to listen and be a loving witness. Insights into reality reveal themselves and are more easily perceived when the mind is calm. On the other hand, when emotional disturbance is felt, the mind reverts to using the primitive part of the brain, the amygdala which is only capable of fight or flight. The ego conjures up storylines to justify one’s identity and hold on for dear life. Rational thinking is turned off at this point. Being able to manage one’s emotions can be developed with practice, and I have found through research and personal experience that mindfulness practice is the key to taming the mind and thus the emotions. Emotion is thought energy.

How do you practice mindfulness?

There are many ways to practice mindfulness. The ultimate way is to practice in each and every moment of your waking life. That is easier said than done, thus sitting meditation becomes a necessary tool. To be present in each moment of our lives, it is helpful to first develop a sitting meditation practice. We then can more easily train the mind to be aware of the breath, thoughts, emotions, and what is happening in the present moment. By focusing the attention of the mind on the present we can more easily let go of thoughts of the past and future and be here, right now, fully.

To practice meditation sit quietly for a period of time, focus the mind on the breath, observe your thoughts, let them pass and refocus your mind on the breath. You are simply taming the mind. Imagine a puppy running this way and that way, no regard for potential danger. The mind is like the puppy, it is thinking about anything and everything. That is what the mind will do left on its own. To tame the mind is to observe it thinking and gently guide it back to the breath continuously for a period of time every day. It is said that 75% of our lives are spent in the past or future, meaning our attention is severely lacking in the present moment as our mind is elsewhere. Developing this habit of observing the mind thinking and bringing the mind back to the present moment creates an ability to bring this practice into daily life. As peace ambassador and Buddhist meditation teacher Thay (Thich Nhat Hanh) has said about washing dishes, “I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water and each movement of my hands....The dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles themselves!” He goes on, “not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes, to live fully in each moment while washing them.” Doing nothing more than paying complete attention to the act of washing the dishes can be a mindfulness practice in itself. The mind is fully immersed in the activity and the higher self

becomes quite happy to be invited to the moment fully. There is no need to be anywhere else, but here, right now, soaking up the pleasure in this moment.

The practice sounds simple enough. And yet, it is one of the most difficult things to put into practice. Some monks say that getting to the cushion means you are 80% there. So, if you can get your body to sit on a cushion, you are 80% there to developing a habit of mindfulness. Once you are sitting you simply focus the mind on the breath and allow thoughts to pass by without judgement or attachment. Creating the discipline of a sitting mindfulness practice takes some effort and often requires community support. You may find it easier to practice with a group. I find it more challenging to be consistent with my personal daily practice without being part of a weekly meditation group. If you are like me, and find the discipline challenging, you too may choose to join a group of people on a similar path. The challenge for you is to begin to develop a habit of sitting and paying attention to the breath while also observing the thinking mind without judgment or attachment.

Developing your mindfulness practice...

As the attention moves from the breath to individual thoughts, gently guide the attention of the mind back to the breath. This is a process of continually letting go. Allow thoughts to pass like clouds in the sky. Use the breath as an anchor for the mind's attention. When you notice the mind getting distracted by a thought simply notice the mind thinking, and gently, without judgement, guide the mind back to the breath. Inhale, feel the breath as it enters the nose, and exhale, feel the breath as it exits the nose.

The observer in you, your higher self or consciousness gently guides the mind's attention to the breath. Allow thoughts to pass by in your mind's eye like clouds in the sky. Simply notice if the mind has run away with any one thought and begun to craft a story of the past or future. When this occurs, simply notice the mind thinking and then guide the mind back to pay attention to the breath. Focus the mind on the inhale and exhale. You can also expand the focus at other times to listening to sounds and focus the mind on what sounds you hear in each moment. This technique can also enhance your awareness of the present moment. The most common anchor for the mind is simply the breath. The breath is easy to find and is always with you wherever you go.

The aim of mindfulness awareness practice is to tame the mind and enhance your ability to manage your emotions. You can be swept away with an emotion such as anger until you allow yourself to sit fully with the emotion. Feeling anger, for example, you can look deeply into the roots of your anger and allow yourself to feel it fully. The emotion may rise and feel quite uncomfortable and even painful. You would rather run from it. If you can stay with the feeling, you will realize that the irritation is fleeting and will pass in a minute. Allow yourself to sit with the emotion and relax, breathing deeply. Notice where the energy is stuck in the body and allow a natural release similar to a pressure cooker. Eventually the pressure releases and in time the same trigger that caused this pain will have no emotional wound remaining. Be patient with yourself, soothe your internal discomfort as if it were a crying baby. Hold the baby tenderly and rock it to ease its pain. Send love to the hurt child within. The energy will pass through the body

like a wave through the ocean. As my grandmother used to say, ‘This too shall pass,’ quoting the bible. The wave of emotion may feel like a tsunami. Once the emotion has cleared the body, you can now choose a calm, more mindful response. Little by little, the internal wound will heal and you will form a new way of being and upgrade an outdated habitual reaction. Mindfulness awareness practice develops the ability to choose responses rather than reacting habitually. With practice, the space between the thought and action widens and allows you time to craft a more thoughtful response.

As holocaust survivor Victor E. Frankl most eloquently said, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” The freedom that widening space allows you is time to choose who you wish to be in this moment, how you wish to act, and what response is most appropriate to your own growth as a human being.

The brain is a complex machine with a mind that is always thinking. The goal is to tame the mind and become aware of our thoughts and habitual thought patterns. These neurological pathways can run deep when we have repeated thought patterns habitually. Our brains have the capacity to develop new neurological pathways. Once you become aware of these thought patterns, you will realize that you have developed the ability to choose your thoughts and are able to manage the critical mind. If we are able to look into our perceptions and choose our thoughts we are more likely to choose the good thoughts. The body and mind, if given the choice, will choose pleasure. Here are some inspiring words to start your day,

“Today I am fortunate to have woken up. I am alive. I have a precious human life...
I am going to benefit others as much as I can.” - *His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama*

How does mindfulness practice affect your ability to listen?

The benefit of having a mindfulness practice as part of your daily activity is to enable you to call upon a state of calmness at any point throughout your day. Starting your day with a mindfulness practice like sitting meditation, you will begin to become more fully present in each moment. You begin the day with a clean slate. You will find that time seems to slow down. You may be surprised to glance at your watch and find you have more time today than you had yesterday. You can pay attention to emotions as they come and go and more calmly observe the ebb and flow of sensations in the body. It is a superpower to remain calm in stressful situations. You become more skillful in choosing your responses rather than reacting habitually. Mindfulness practice affects your ability to control your fight or flight reaction, increasing your capacity to calm the amygdala, the primitive part of the brain.

Daniel Goleman’s book, *Emotional Intelligence*, suggests that emotional intelligence is just as important as intellectual intelligence. He developed the theory that self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills can be taught. Wisdom has an emotional quotient which is equally if not more important than intellect for leadership ability.

Goleman found that, “helping children improve their self-awareness and confidence, manage their disturbing emotions and impulses, and increase their empathy pays off not just in improved behavior but in measurable academic achievement.” Further research into Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has discovered, “improvements in attention and working memory, key functions of the prefrontal cortex. This strongly suggests [that] neuroplasticity, the shaping of the brain through repeated experience, plays a key role in the benefits from SEL.”

Emotional Intelligence has been applied in the business setting with leadership development. Google engineer and leader Chade-Meng Tan developed a popular seven-week course and book entitled , “Search Inside Yourself” teaching emotional intelligence using mindfulness practice and good mental habits grounded in the theory of neuroplasticity, or “the capacity of the brain to develop and change throughout life.” Our brains develop new neural pathways through new life experiences which means we have the capacity to develop new habits and let go of habits that are no longer helpful. Therefore, by learning to be mindful, you can remain calm where previously you may have acted out in anger, behaved inappropriately or exchanged regrettable words.

In my experience as an executive coach, emotional intelligence is key in leadership capability at the top of the organization. Leaders who *care* about people have more loyal followings. The main reason a person will leave their job is due to the relationship with their supervisor. Therefore, the more you and your leaders develop caring relationships with your staff members, the healthier the organization and the more loyal your staff will become.

It is best to lead by example. Develop a mindfulness awareness practice. There are many ways people practice that do not include a sitting practice. Yet, I have found that a sitting practice is a very useful discipline to engage in regularly. While being still, you are more able to place your full attention on steadying the mind and observing how the mind works. With consistent practice, you become more present in each moment of life. Some people prefer to walk, run, bike, swim, or practice yoga or other physical activity while keeping a focus on what is happening in each moment with each breath. These moving meditations are mindfulness practices. The point of the practice, whether seated or moving, is to pay attention to what is happening in the present moment and be fully there; hence not thinking about the past or the future.

Client Story: Through 360 degree feedback, I learned that one of my clients, we'll call him Brad, came across as aggressive with some colleagues, putting them in an awkward defensive position. One of his peers felt as though they might get into a “backyard brawl.” When Brad found out how he was being perceived and realized meditation might help, he asked me to teach him how to meditate. We planned to do this training in our next meeting.

When we met again, he was eager to get started. He suggested we take a walk outside. We walked through the bustling financial district and found a park bench. I explained what we were about to do and guided him in a seated meditation. I began with these instructions, which you may try now.

“Sit in a comfortable position with both feet flat on the ground. Lift your spine tall, sit upright, not too stiff and not too loose. Place your hands on your thighs. Cast a soft gaze toward the ground or close your eyes, whichever is more comfortable. Focus your attention on the breath. Notice the breath as it is. There is no need to control the breath. Just notice the feeling as you inhale and exhale through the nose. Relax your forehead, jaw, and tongue. Pay attention to the breath. Notice the feeling of cool air entering the nostrils as you breathe in and warm air exiting the nostrils as you breathe out. If your mind wanders gently bring your attention back to the breath. Observe your thoughts as they float by like clouds in the sky. If you find yourself thinking, label this activity as “thinking” and come back to the breath. Continue observing and letting go of thoughts, refocusing the mind and your attention on the breath. I will be silent now for two minutes so that you can practice on your own. (Two minutes of silence.) Observe whether your mind wandered during this time. Without any judgment, gently guide your attention to the breath, inhaling and exhaling. Continue focusing on the breath allowing thoughts to float by; you can come back to those thoughts later once we are done practicing. Focus the mind on the breath, inhaling and exhaling through the nose. Now, gently open your eyes.”

After practicing, we discussed how meditation works and how he could practice this at home, working up to ten minutes a day. As we began future meetings together, we started by meditating together for about ten minutes with some portion guided and some silent, similar to instructions provided here.

Brad began practicing at home by relaxing on his patio each night after work. One day he called, excited to share what had just happened during a meeting. He was meeting with a colleague that previously would have turned into a contentious interaction, yet this time, he noticed that he was relaxed, calm, and focused on listening to his colleague instead. Brad was sitting back in his chair aware of his body. As the meeting came to an end, his colleague thanked him for listening.

Brad was ecstatic to be able to monitor his own emotions and body language during the meeting. This was a huge shift. He went from zero self-awareness to “practically floating above my body able to control my words and emotions and listen to my colleague with my full attention.” He was also noticing a shift in his ability to be fully present with both family members and colleagues. That was exactly the result we were going for.

Begin developing your own practice in mindfulness. You can use this form of meditation by following my simple instructions. You may want to start small with two minutes of silence and work your way up to ten minutes a day. That is all you need. If you prefer to lengthen the time to 20 or 30 minutes, you may find you enjoy a longer practice. Do not be hard on yourself if you forget to practice, just get back to developing a habit. Some people have a special place in their home or office to sit and meditate. Others practice while waiting for their tea to brew. I prefer to sit first thing in the morning from ten to twenty minutes or longer. Find a time and a place that works for you. Block out time on your calendar, or find a tool to support your ability to develop this habit.

You may find that a guided meditation is best to get started. Too many minutes of silence can be difficult for someone who is just beginning a mindfulness practice. It was for me. I offer a simple mindful start to my client meetings to clear the slate and bring us both into the present moment. I often include a guided meditation providing a body scan from head to toe so that my client begins by paying attention to any tension held in the body and breathes into that area of the body to relax. I follow with minutes of silent meditation to aid in my client developing their own habit. You may choose to do this for your staff as well. This will bring everyone into the present moment and allow them the opportunity to let go of everything that has happened prior to the meeting and release any thoughts of the future. As you lead others, *you* want to be fully present and you want *them* to be fully present. Productivity is enhanced with this mindful start to your meeting. By starting with a mindful practice each day and in your meetings, you will heighten your awareness, achieve more of what you want and live and lead a more authentic life.