

Two Tools Are Better Than One: Mindfulness and Developmental Coaching for Leaders

by

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A stick can be used as a simple tool. So can a rock. Archimedes may not be the one who came up with the bright idea of using them in tandem, but he did famously extol the power of the resulting synergy, claiming that with a place to stand and a lever, he could move the world. More recently, noted psychologist Shawn Achor, called one of the seven principles that he proposed predict success and achievement, The Fulcrum and the Lever. This principle describes how we can adjust our mindset (our fulcrum) in a way that gives us the power (the lever) to be more fulfilled and successful (Achor, 2010, p. 16). This article proposes that, once again, the combination of two tools—in this case, mindfulness meditation practice and developmental coaching—can offer the leverage leaders need to broaden their perspectives and increase their capacity for meeting today’s complex challenges.

Today’s World, Yesterday’s Mind

Physical tools are useful in manipulating the material world. With the evolution of organizations, people devised different sorts of tools, conceptual ones. Various management theories came and went. Some were useful in their time, but times change and what worked in the last century may not be much help to leaders today and in the future. Complicating matters is our evolutionary heritage—the way we’re hard-wired.

Limits on memory, attention, and computing speed mean the brain can only process a fraction of the information that might be relevant in any given situation. Achor (2010) states that while the human brain receives eleven million pieces of information every second from our environment, it can process only forty bits per second. This means the brain has to choose what tiny percentage of this input to process and what huge chunk to dismiss or ignore. This fact means we take cognitive shortcuts—rules of thumb and mental models—to cut down what can seem chaotic to a more manageable state. Our cognitive biases—often nonconscious and based on existing beliefs, expectations, and values—incline us to welcome only information that confirms them and ignore or reject what doesn't.

In a simple world, or even a complicated but relatively orderly one, horizontal learning—the accumulation of knowledge about specific and general topics relevant to our area of expertise, is usually adequate. But the world that leaders in the twenty-first century inhabit is characterized by VUCA—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, an acronym pointing toward the unpredictability inherent in facing situations that are in flux and tasks that are increasingly unbounded (Garvey Berger, p. 9). Leading in a VUCA world demands vertical or transformational learning, which is learning that focuses on the ways people think and act—the development of their “action logics”—in qualitatively more complex and integrated ways (Rooke & Torbert, 2006). Which raises the pressing question: what tools will best help to accomplish that?

Like a Fish Finding Water

Vertical or transformational learning requires what has been termed “inner reconnaissance” (Hyman, 2019). Leaders need to develop familiarity with how their own inner processes—sensory, emotional, cognitive, and narrative—shape the way they see the world around them;

they need to develop self-awareness and self-knowledge. In adult developmental terminology, they need to move from *subject*—that which you cannot yet see because you are fused with it—to *object*—that which you can see and make decisions about because you have gained more distance from it (Garvey Berger, p. 18).

Mindfulness meditation practice and developmental coaching are two tools that have proven effective in cultivating self-awareness and self-knowledge. When combined, they complement and augment each other in growing the client's capacity to see and deal more effectively with complexity. The synergy thus created accelerates the development of emotional intelligence, which is the ability to accurately perceive, utilize, reason about, and manage one's feelings and emotions. Mindfulness meditation offers a lens on our patterns; through practicing it we learn to create the space to choose our responses to situations rather than reacting habitually. Developmental coaching prompts us to recognize, by increasingly taking self as object, how we may be perpetuating habitual patterns that do not serve us well, and helps us open to larger perspectives and possibilities.

When we pay attention to how we inhabit the world, to the inner tendencies and forces that shape our experience, we are like fish finally recognizing water. Mind is our medium, the lens through which everything we experience is filtered. Our mindset is the interpretive process by which we make sense of that experience, and a fixed mindset, characterized by the inability to take self as object, is a major obstacle in developing as a leader because it causes us to interpret the world in habitual ways. One goal of vertical learning is to shift from fixed mindset to growth mindset, expanding one's perspective and capacity for dealing with complexity and being open to new challenges.

Cultivating self-awareness and self-knowledge and increasing one's cognitive capacity to take oneself as object depends on the ability to focus attention on one's inner state, from a bigger perspective, and gain reliable competence in assessing and managing one's mindset—those assumptions and attitudes that color how the world is perceived. Mindfulness practice, the value of which is supported by increasingly robust neuroscientific evidence, is a fundamental tool for paying attention to consciousness. A developmental coaching relationship in which client and coach are each individually engaged in the practice of mindfulness brings insight into the nature of the self for both.

The Lever and the Fulcrum

Developmental coaching conversations aim to uncover structures of mind and, in so doing, make the invisible visible, bringing what has been nonconscious into awareness. The client is helped to see, with new eyes, her meaning-making systems, the characteristic ways in which she makes sense of her world. Based on Robert Kegan's theory of adult development, the most common structure of mind for adults is the socialized mind and the midzone between the socialized and the self-authored mind. In the socialized form of mind, the client sees her world through the meaning-making system of others. The validation of others is paramount in this form of mind because there is no sense of what "I want" outside of the expectations of others (Garvey Berger, p. 21).

Through developmental coaching, an increasing clarity into meaning-making systems develops as the coach probes for entry points or doorways into the client's view of her world—including thoughts, feelings, emotions, bodily sensations, core values, and sense of identity—which allow the client to begin to identify the stories she has adopted (Garvey Berger, 2012). In this way, viewing her world and the choices available to her from a larger perspective, reveals

the possibility of becoming something today's leaders dealing with increasing complexity need to be—"self-authoring" (Coughlin, 2015). The leverage provided by combining mindfulness meditation practice and developmental coaching facilitates movement from the socialized self that is subject to the opinions and desires of others, to the self-authoring self as the client begins to recognize her own self-authoring voice (Garvey Berger, p. 22).

To push the metaphor a bit further, in moving beyond the self-authored form of mind toward the self-transformational form of mind for example, mindfulness could be seen as the lever arm and developmental coaching as the fulcrum; when coach and client are fully invested in the coaching relationship and committed to a practice of mindfulness meditation, they accelerate insight from a bigger lens perspective. Thus, mindfulness, at whatever structure of mind the client is in, cultivates increasing familiarity with her inner narrative and reveals the extent to which it is habitual, scattered, and discursive. Concurrently, developmental coaching invites the client to explore her "growth edge"—the space where she reaches the edge of her current meaning-making capacity (Garvey Berger, p. 74)—and question the assumptions and potential blind spots hidden within that narrative.

The ability to direct and sustain one's own attention, together with inquisitive introspection, begins to loosen fixed mindsets, enhancing self-awareness and self-knowledge and creating fertile ground for transformative growth. The collaborative effort between coach and client can trigger fresh perspectives for both and foster openness to further assimilating self-awareness and self-knowledge.

Leveraging Inherent Awareness

The deepening of mindfulness practice also brings recognition of a more basic level of consciousness that underlies the ongoing flow of thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Many growth technologies point toward, but rarely explicitly name, that level—the state of inherent awareness—the fundamental underlying capacity of mind that recognizes itself as aware. It is a steady and ever-present quality of consciousness that can tune in to what is going on within oneself in any given moment, inclusive of habitual thought patterns and emotional reactions, but only if attention is paid to it.

Developing familiarity with inherent awareness, one's basic essence, and cultivating the ability to connect with it and recognize the insights emerging from it, invites movement and initiates the shift from identifying with self as subject to taking self as object; it activates enormous growth potential, as the realization that the “self” is not fixed begins to permeate perspective. This recognition further leads to an even more transformative insight—the idea that we have a “self” that needs to be “made better” or somehow “unstuck” is itself a misperception. Recognizing that our perception is both relative and selective invites us to shift our identification to something more constant—our basic state of inherent awareness, which can be accessed and cultivated through mindfulness training. This state is the wellspring of presence, authenticity, compassion, wisdom, and ethical conduct, competencies known to enhance mindful and skillful leadership.

Developing and strengthening the connection with inherent awareness accelerates vertical learning and a growth mindset. It also optimizes well-being and builds resilience by reducing the impact of negative stress and destructive emotions. Developing the ability to rest in one's inherent awareness leads to the experience of unconditional confidence—the sense that one is capable of meeting challenges as they arise and that one has the courageous authenticity to speak

truth to power, as well as the willingness to offer oneself in compassionate service to a higher purpose and a greater good.

Ultimately, combining developmental coaching and mindfulness practice can fast track leaders to embody the behavior they seek in others and foster growth mindset organizational cultures that create the conditions that unleash the potential of those around them. The best leaders, at all levels, do, in fact, often act as coaches intentionally developing the organization, and generally caring about the growth of their people as much as they care about the growth of the core business (Garvey Berger, p. 3). Their presence, perspective, and humor create an atmosphere of workability, creativity and willingness to learn from failure that empowers others to take risks. In this way, leaders bring to bear not only their own highest potential in meeting challenges, they also foster the growth of others, at all levels in the organization, to realize their highest potential. That's real leverage in a VUCA world.

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