

MINDFULNESS AND LETTING GO

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If senior managers could become more mindful we could strengthen our grounding in reality. It is hard for leaders to influence reality when we can't even see it! The simplest definition I have heard of mindfulness is the practice of "paying attention without judgement". Simple maybe, but not so easy and not so common!

If you experiment with paying attention to how well you pay attention many of us will notice that our attention is regularly captured or scattered – not open and not focused. And we will notice that while we pay attention we do so through a filter of judging, analysing, evaluating, interpreting, comparing and opinion making. These are wonderful intellectual capacities we have but when they are on automatic and are unobserved these mental activities can prejudice and obscure reality.

There are many ways that we can become more mindful – relaxation, reflection, genuine dialogue – but the most powerful practice is learn to meditate. When leaders are more mindful not only do they develop a stronger relationship with reality but they acquire the capacity to insert a pause for genuine choice before engaging in some habitual and ineffective reaction to people and situations. Take as an example the choice to let go and accept.

I was doing some consulting work with an Executive Group recently and we were exploring how the ability to let go and accept that things are the way they are, can help leaders reduce their stress levels and be more effective. Some of the general managers immediately protested that passivity never changed anything! I appreciate that it takes a lot of commitment and intentionality by senior managers to get

anything done, but attachment is different again and it often subverts the best of intentions.

I related an experience I had with a boss once who I didn't like or respect because he had poor people skills, didn't listen to anyone else, micro-managed us and regularly made poor business decisions. I explained how this upset me a lot, stressed me out a lot and even spilt over into my private life, and that I never had any trouble finding others at work who would engage in lengthy conversations with me on the same topic. Yet I found that when I let go of my views and just accepted that he was the boss and he was the way he was and he didn't need to be any different, most of my agitation dissipated and I was much calmer and much more capable of dealing with him and responding constructively. It didn't change him, although it did over time change some of the ways he appeared to me, as well as changing my stress levels and my ability to make choices in regard to him.

"That doesn't work!", exclaimed one of the general managers. "I tried it with my donkey of a CEO at my last company. My wife told me that I needed to accept him or leave, so I tried accepting him and I accepted that I couldn't change him, but he still drove me nuts and in the end I had to leave. It wasn't just me - several months later the Board sacked him anyway!"

This may be an example of not really letting go and accepting, and it provides a powerful insight into the nature of attachment. With my previous boss I often told myself to just accept him and the way he was, and it made no difference. Why? Because this is an intellectual form of acceptance. Beneath the intellectual acceptance I was still holding onto a bunch of beliefs or "buts" - but he shouldn't be this way; but I don't want it to be this way; but this is wrong. These suckers are the ones that I really needed to let go. And when you examine them you can see why they cause so much strife and interfere with effectiveness - they are all attempting to deny reality and replace it with a form of fantasy.

Attachment is a lot about preferring fantasy over reality. We fantasize about some ideal in the future, or one lost in the past or one which came so close but didn't eventuate. We won't let go of it! Entertaining the fantasy gives us a small emotional charge or payoff, and we settle for that instead of having a big impact on reality which is our real leadership job.