

Mindfulness Helps You Become a Better Leader

by Bill George

OCTOBER 26, 2012

Ever since the financial crisis of 2008, I have sensed from many leaders that they want to do a better job of leading in accordance with their personal values. The crisis exposed the fallacies of measuring success in monetary terms and left many leaders with a deep feeling of unease that they were being pulled away from what I call their True North.

As markets rose and bonus pools grew, it was all too easy to celebrate the rising tide of wealth without examining the process that created it. Too many leaders placed self-interest ahead of their organizations' interests, and ended up disappointing the customers, employees, and shareholders who had trusted them. I often advise emerging leaders, "You know you're in trouble when you start to judge your self-worth by your net worth." Nevertheless, many leaders get caught up in this game without realizing it.

This happened to me in 1988, when I was an executive vice president at Honeywell, en route to the top. By external standards I was highly successful, but inside I was deeply unhappy. I had begun to focus too much on impressing other people and positioning myself to become CEO. I was caught up with external measures of success instead of looking inward to measure my success as a human and a leader. I was losing my way.

My colleague, Harvard Professor Clayton Christensen, addressed this topic in his HBR article, *How Will You Measure Your Life?* Clay observed that few people, if any, intend at the outset of their career to behave dishonestly and hurt others. Early on, even Bernie Madoff and Enron's Jeff Skilling planned to live honest lives. But then, Christensen says, they started making exceptions to the rules "just this once."

At Harvard Business School, we are challenging students to think hard about their definition of success and what's important in their lives. Instead of viewing success as reaching a certain position or achieving a certain net worth, we encourage these future leaders to see success as making a positive difference in the lives of their colleagues, their organizations, their families, and society as a whole. The course that I created in 2005, Authentic Leadership Development (ALD), has become one of the most popular elective MBA courses, thanks to my HBS colleagues who are currently teaching it. It enables second-year MBAs to ground their careers in their beliefs, values, and principles, following the authentic leadership process described in my 2007 book, *True North*. More recently, ALD has become a very popular course for executives of global companies.

With all the near-term pressures in today's society, especially in business, it is very difficult to find the right equilibrium between achieving our long-term goals and short-term financial metrics. As you take on greater leadership responsibilities, the key is to stay grounded and authentic, face new challenges with humility, and balance professional success with more important but less easily quantified measures of personal success. That is much easier said than done.

The practice of mindful leadership gives you tools to measure and manage your life as you're living it. It teaches you to pay attention to the present moment, recognizing your feelings and emotions and keeping them under control, especially when faced with highly stressful situations. When you are mindful, you're aware of your presence and the ways you

impact other people. You're able to both observe and participate in each moment, while recognizing the implications of your actions for the longer term. And that prevents you from slipping into a life that pulls you away from your values.

I don't use the word "practice" lightly. In order to gain awareness and clarity about the present moment, you must be able to quiet your mind. That is tremendously difficult and takes a lifetime of practice. In 2012, I had the privilege of presenting my ideas on authentic leadership to his Holiness the Dalai Lama. When I asked him what it took to become an authentic leader, he replied, "You must have practices that you engage in every day."

My most important introspective practice is meditation, something I try to do for twenty minutes twice a day. In 1975 I went with my wife Penny to a Transcendental Meditation (TM) Workshop. Although I never adopted the spiritual portion of TM, the physical practice became an integral part of my daily routine. Meditation has been a godsend for me. As an active leader who has held highly stressful roles since my mid-twenties, I was diagnosed with high blood pressure in my early thirties. When I started meditating, I was able to stay calmer and more focused in my leadership, without losing the "edge" that I believed had made me successful. Meditation enabled me to cast off the many trivial worries that once possessed me and gain clarity about what was really important. I gradually became more self-aware and more sensitive to the impact I was having on others. Just as important, my blood pressure returned to normal and stayed there.

In recent years, medical studies have found evidence of meditation's many benefits, including protecting against health problems from high blood pressure and arthritis to infertility, reducing stress, improving attention and sensory processing; and physically altering parts of the brain associated with learning and memory, emotional regulation, and perspective-taking – critical cognitive skills for leaders attempting to maintain their equilibrium under constant pressure.

While many CEOs and companies are embracing meditation, it may not be for everyone. The important thing is to have a set time each day to pull back from the intense pressures of leadership to reflect on what is happening. In addition to meditation, I know leaders who take time for daily journaling, prayer, and reflecting while walking, hiking or jogging. I also find it extremely helpful to share the day's events with Penny and seek her counsel.

Regardless of the daily introspective practice you choose, the pursuit of mindful leadership will help you achieve clarity about what is important to you and a deeper understanding of the world around you. Mindfulness will help you clear away the trivia and needless worries about unimportant things, nurture passion for your work and compassion for others, and develop the ability to empower the people in your organization.

Bill George is professor of management practice at Harvard Business School and former chair and CEO of Medtronic.

This article is about MANAGING YOURSELF

+ FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: LEADERSHIP

Comments

Leave a Comment

✓ **JOIN THE CONVERSATION**

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.