

Article series on Relational Mindfulness for the journal *Coaching at Work*

This three-part series by Emma Donaldson-Feilder explores 'relational mindfulness' - an approach that takes mindfulness into the interpersonal sphere - and what it can offer leaders, coaches, mentors, supervisors and those they work with.

Part 1 appeared in the March/April 2020 issue (Vol 15, Issue 2)

Part 2 appeared in the May/June 2020 issue (Vol 15, Issue 3)

Part 3 appeared in the July/August 2020 issue (Vol 15, Issue 4)

Part 3. What does relational mindfulness mean for leadership development?

In part 1, I explained how relational mindfulness (RM) is about taking mindfulness practice into the relational sphere, and how the RM programmes I've developed incorporate a particular form of RM practice that is based on Insight Dialogue (ID; Kramer, 2007). I also set out how this grounding in ID gives RM a number of distinguishing characteristics: it's a dialogic form of meditation, supported by silent/personal practice; it uses six guidelines to anchor the meditative nature of the practice (*Pause, Relax, Open, Attune to emergence, Listen deeply Speak the truth*); and it includes contemplation topics that steer the meditative sharing.

In part 2, I explored how ID and RM depend on and further develop three capacities: meditative qualities, relational qualities, and wisdom or insight. These are powerful capacities in all domains of human existence, and are likely to be of particular benefit to those for whom relationship is a key part of their role. Clearly, this is the case for coaches, supervisors and mentors; it's also true for those in leadership and people management positions.

In this final article in the series, I will home in on the latter context to explore the potential to use RM to support leadership development. I will also pick up where part 2 left off in exploring embodiment and the importance of the quality of our 'being'. While I will share the research I've conducted in the area and its implications, my underlying enthusiasm continues to be driven by my personal experience of the enormous benefits RM has provided. In my own coaching and supervision practice, RM has been a positive influence on how I coach/ supervise and how I develop my clients' capabilities in their leadership and coaching roles; and I've also been touched by what others who have experienced RM say about the benefits to them.

RM and leaders

As mentioned in part 1, my interest in how to integrate RM into leadership development, and the lack of an existing evidence-base to guide this integration, led to me tumbling into doing a professional doctorate.

The first step in my doctoral research was to take a systematic look at existing research about using mindfulness and meditation for developing leadership. Reviewing the literature showed that, while there's now a solid body of research evidence about the clinical use of mindfulness and meditation interventions, and a rapidly growing research

literature on the use of mindfulness interventions in workplaces (e.g. Jamieson and Tuckey, 2017; Lomas et al, 2017), the number of research studies that have applied mindfulness and meditation to leadership development is very small and the quality of the research rather variable. However, there's now a small pool of evidence on which to draw. Many of the studies have looked at the wellbeing of participants, arguing that this is important for leadership effectiveness, with most showing improvement in participant wellbeing following a mindfulness/ meditation programme. Meanwhile, a number of studies have looked at changes in aspects of leadership. These mostly show that participants' leadership capability, for example, authentic leadership, increased following the mindfulness/ meditation programme under research. Overall, therefore, this systematic literature review led my co-authors and me to conclude that there are 'encouraging signs' that mindfulness and meditation could improve not only leaders'/ managers' wellbeing, but also their leadership capability (Donaldson-Feilder, Lewis & Yarker, 2018). For example, looking across the range of studies, researchers found improvements in participants' authenticity, transparency, self-understanding, collaboration, openness to others, compassion, people management, agility in complexity, social consciousness and decision-making, and capacity to manage change.

The existing research had only explored the use of personal or internal mindfulness for leadership development; but, given the centrality of relationships to leadership, it seemed to me that RM had the potential to offer benefits over and above those offered by personal or internal mindfulness. The second phase of my doctoral research therefore set out to explore the possibility of using RM to develop leadership capability. Through a combination of 8 in-depth interviews, two questionnaire surveys and a focus group, I drew together the views of 39 experts in the field on this possibility and on how to develop a leadership development programme based on ID/RM (forthcoming scientific paper providing full details, Donaldson-Feilder, Lewis, Yarker, & Whiley, under review). The encouraging finding was that those with an understanding of ID and of workplaces/ leadership development agreed with my view that there's potential to use programmes based on ID/RM to develop leadership capability. While actually running an ID/RM-based leadership development programme would require training in offering this form of meditation, there are some valuable insights from the research for all coaches, supervisors and leadership development professionals.

Embodiment

One key theme emerging from my research was the centrality of embodiment: those of us looking to support our clients to develop leadership and coaching qualities need to embody these qualities ourselves. For example, we need to be self-aware, authentic, empathetic, compassionate, fully present in the moment, listening deeply to ourselves and others, open to a range of perspectives, adaptable, resilient and flexible, and to recognise and handle complexity, paradox and ambiguity. The term 'embody' generally refers to how one personifies, epitomises or manifests a particular quality, a sense of role modelling. It also has the sense of representing something in bodily form, suggesting that we need to be aware of our body and what it's transmitting. The importance of embodiment is particularly strong for qualities such as mindful presence, awareness, compassion, kindness, appreciation, equanimity and connecting with others.

The quality of outcome that leaders and people managers, coaches, supervisors and mentors, and anyone else who operates through relationships can achieve will depend to a large extent on the quality of relationship they can establish. The key responsibilities of leaders and managers are to inspire, guide and support those who work for and with them, and many leadership models focus on relational leadership in one form or another (Lewis & Donaldson-Feilder, 2012). Similarly, coaching and supervision research and models repeatedly emphasise that the relationship with the client is at least as important

as, if not more important than, the approach taken by the coach or supervisor (e.g. Lai & McDowall, 2014).

Taking this a step further, as we move into more senior levels of leadership or further along our developmental journey as coaches, we increasingly learn the significance of who we are 'being', over and above what we are 'doing', particularly in the relational sphere (Hullinger & DiGirolamo, 2020). The quality of our interactions depends on who we are in our relationships or, in other words, what we embody. Our influence and effectiveness come from what we are embodying, our relational presence. In a wonderful cascade of embodiment, what supervisors embody in supervision supports what their supervisees embody as coaches, which in turn supports what their leader clients embody in their leadership roles. At any point in this chain, the quality of relational presence will directly benefit those who experience it and, through them, will benefit those with whom they have relationships.

Relational 'being'

As explored in the previous parts of this article series, RM provides a practice and a set of guidelines that help us explore who we're being in relationship with others, including our relational patterns and habits, enhancing our relational awareness and helping us 'get out of our own way'. As with a lot of mindfulness and meditation approaches, it does this partly by supporting increased awareness of bodily sensations and emotions – as well as our conceptual mind – bringing us in closer touch with the messages and potential wisdom that reside in our bodies. Through this process, RM helps us develop our meditative and relational qualities, and our capacity for wisdom: the ID/RM guidelines can help us embody calm presence while in the midst of relationship, together with friendly and empathetic awareness, openness to both self and others, attunement to the changing relational moment, deep listening, and discernment in speaking the truth.

My experience and that of others who practice ID/RM suggest that the qualities RM develops allow us to listen to others in nurturing, supportive, and insight-giving ways. As Gregory Kramer talks about in his retreats, we have the potential to '*listen the speaker into being*'. Through the meditative, relational presence we embody, we support the other person to access their own meditative, relational presence. There's a process of nervous systems attuning to one another that generates a strong embodied sense of connection, as outlined in Barbara Frederickson's work on positivity resonance (Frederickson, 2013). In the context of coaching, supervision or leadership, this quality of attention can support valuable shifts in clients' or followers' perspective, in line with Nancy Kline's work on generative thinking spaces (Kline, 1999).

RM in practice

My doctoral research was motivated by my belief that RM has the potential to offer enormous benefits to leaders and managers: that it could help develop more relational, aware approaches to leadership, which could in turn create kinder, wiser workplaces and enhance employee health and wellbeing. Since completing my doctoral research, I've been speaking about RM and offering RM programmes to a variety of people and finding that others share my enthusiasm.

The coaching community has proven particularly receptive to the potential of RM for developing coaching and supervision capability. To my delight, another community that has responded well to the experience of RM practice has been some of those offering leadership development and culture change in the UK National Health Service (NHS). Earlier this year (in the pre-COVID era) I facilitated RM practice for a group of people drawn from leadership and organisational development bodies across the NHS in all four UK nations and the Republic of Ireland. The feedback I received was overwhelming:

comments suggested that practising RM had given them a different perspective on themselves and their leadership approach, a transformative experience of listening and speaking in new and nourishing ways, and a deep level of relational connection.

The NHS interest has partly been sparked by the natural fit between RM and the NHS model of compassionate leadership. This model is made up of four elements: attending, empathising, understanding and helping. My exploration of this with people in the field suggests that RM practice has the potential to build leaders' capacity in all four of these compassionate leadership areas. As I write, the NHS is caught in the maelstrom of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for healthcare organisations to be led with wise compassion has probably never been greater, so the hope is that RM can help deliver this through building compassionate leadership in NHS leaders.

For those providing coaching and supervision within NHS settings, bringing a relationally mindful approach to your client work could be a way to support this move towards compassionate leadership. More broadly, coaching and supervision that embodies relationally mindful ways of being is relevant to a wide range of leadership development contexts. For those interested in vertical development (Petrie, 2014) and 'post-conventional' forms of leadership, the wisdom element of RM could be a way of supporting individuals to become more conscious and move to higher levels of human development. As mentioned in part 2, RM practice aims to create insight and develop wisdom through meditative dialogue that encourages present-moment, shared exploration of assumptions, habits, patterns and/or aspects of the human experience. This has the potential to support participants' ability to question their own and others' meaning structures, recognise and deal with complex, interdependent systems, and bring quality attention and awareness to themselves, others and their environment, capacities that distinguish leaders who are at the higher levels in typologies of adult development, such as Rooke and Torbert's classic model (2005). In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, and possibly its aftermath, the need for leaders to bring wisdom and think in complex, systemic, strategic and interdependent ways has never seemed more pertinent.

Who is most likely to benefit from RM and where care needs to be exercised

Returning to my doctoral research findings, I identified a number of characteristics that would help participants to get the most out of RM-based development (see Box 1), the most important of which was deemed to be openness to change.

BOX 1

What will help get the most out of RM-based development?

- Openness to change, including being ready to explore, experiment and be challenged, being on a path of self-development and being open-minded and open-hearted
- Experience of meditation, mindfulness and reflection in group settings
- Resilience
- Interest in the human experience, relationships and personal patterns
- Motivation and engagement

Source: Donaldson-Feilder, Lewis, Yarker, & Whiley (under review)

The research also highlighted some areas that might indicate a need to tread carefully (see Box 2), which might be warning signs for anyone offering leadership, coach or supervisor development to watch out for, but are perhaps particularly important in the case of RM-based programmes.

BOX 2

Potential warning signs for when to tread carefully

These include when an individual:

- Is in a poor cognitive and emotional state
- Has an unhelpful approach to life (e.g. needing to be the expert, high degrees of striving and agitation, dissociation, or experiential avoidance)
- Has an unhelpful attitude to self-development (e.g. expecting a one-time fix, or looking for technical expertise not self-development).

Source: Donaldson-Feilder, Lewis, Yarker, & Whiley (under review)

Conclusion

I hope this series has provided food for thought and stimulated interest in the potential offered by bringing together mindfulness, relationship and wisdom in the form of RM practice. As the world struggles with COVID-19, climate change and global suffering of all kinds, it feels that RM is a practice whose time has come. We need ways to connect with one another, understand each other, be aware of our impact on others and our world. We need to be present to ourselves and others in ways that nurture and repair, that embody kindness and compassion; and above all, we need to listen deeply, speak wisely and collaborate effectively to build a better future. As coaches and supervisors, we have the opportunity to support leadership that enables all of this, and I believe that RM practice can help us to do so.

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If you want to try out RM practice for yourself, Coaching at Work is offering the opportunity to experience RM for Coaches in a one-day virtual masterclass on 10 November. <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/relational-mindfulness-for-coaches-mentors-and-supervisors-online-event-tickets-84862444857>