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## Leadership: Today's workplace needs mindful leaders

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**Ray Williams** Apr 27, 2011 – 3:17 PM ET | Last Updated: May 16, 2011 10:22 AM ET

Most leadership books and training programs focus on how leaders can achieve more — do more, better, faster, with spectacular results. We've become obsessed with continuous improvement at increasing speed, with resulting rising stress levels to leaders and their followers and deteriorating relationships. Mindfulness as both a leadership practice and workplace culture holds the promise to bring back balance and better health.

There's a price to pay for our breakneck speed to continuously improve, and produce. In an article in **Forbes** magazine, professors Cyril Bouquet and Ben Bryant, citing the disastrous collision of two Boeing 747s in the Canary Islands in 1977, killing 583 people, was a case of poor attention management. They argue that two kinds of attention disorders exacerbate the difficulties companies face in economic downturns — fixation and relaxation. In the case of fixation, the leaders are too preoccupied with a few central signals or information and ignore everything else. With respect to relaxation, Bouquet and Bryant contend that excessive relaxation follows sustained periods of high concentration. The authors argue that mindfulness can lessen the attention problems of fixation and relaxation.

The demands of leadership can produce what is known as “power stress,” which often leaves even the best leaders physically and emotionally drained. Leaders can easily find themselves moving from an “approach” orientation, where they are emotionally open, engaged and innovative, to an one of “avoidance,” characterized by aversion, irritability, aggression, fear and close-mindedness.

If leaders believe they don't have the time to work through all aspects of a problem they are inclined to narrow their perspectives and take cognitive shortcuts, and become more impulsive and reactive. Their actions, in effect become “mindless” and automatic.

So what exactly is mindfulness? Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, describes mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.” Other definitions are: “bringing one's complete attention to the

present experience on a moment-to-moment basis,” and “it includes a quality of compassion, acceptance and loving-kindness.”

In tough economic times, there’s often a knee-jerk reactive argument for panic, pessimism and “getting tough” most of which generate a culture of fear. Mindfulness, practiced extensively in organizations, can be a powerful antidote to the fear and aggression tendencies.

Buddhist trained HR executive, Michael Carroll, author of the **Mindful Leader: Awakening Your Natural Management Skills Through Mindfulness Meditation** explains how the key principles of mindfulness apply to company leaders. He argues that mindfulness in leaders and their organizations can:

- Heal toxic workplace cultures where anxiety and stress impede creativity and performance;
- Cultivate courage and confidence in spite of workplace difficulties in economic downturns;
- Pursue organizational goals without neglecting the here and now;
- Lead with wisdom and gentleness, not only with ambition, relentless drive and power;
- Develop innate leadership talents.

Daniel Goleman, an acknowledged expert on emotional intelligence in leadership and organizations, writes in **Primal Leadership** “the first tasks of management has nothing to do with leading others; step one poses the challenge of knowing and managing oneself.” If leaders are constantly in the doing phase, without taking time for self-reflection and mindfulness, this knowing of oneself presents a serious challenge.

Richard Boyatzis, professor of organizational behavior at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, and author of **Resonant Leadership**, argues that good leaders attain resonance with those around them through self awareness and relationship management, all clearly connected to mindfulness.

To become mindful leaders and tap into that power, leaders must:

- Let go of their belief in themselves as technical and problem-solving geniuses and embrace the notion of becoming mindful partners. This requires building an awareness of and becoming more open to nuance and subtlety.
- Be open to the concept of an unknown future. What we plan for today may not work tomorrow. To succeed in an unknown future, leaders must acknowledge mistakes quickly when things are not turning out as they predicted; be flexible enough to make changes quickly without defending their territory or ego;

- Become skilled at leading through intuitive reflection rather than logical analysis;
- Become more open and accepting of the world and others, and their differing points of view, rather than trying to reshape the world in the leader's own image.
- Become more mindful of what is going on in terms of their own thoughts, emotions and body and what is going on in context. External mindfulness is being able to sense situations, being aware of the signals and cues in different contexts, and paying attention to them. Internal mindfulness is being aware of one's body, emotions and thoughts and requires the ability and attitude to monitor one's inner reality.

And mindfulness can have tremendous impact on workplace culture. Companies such as Raytheon, Procter and Gamble, Unilever, NortelNetworks, Comcast, Yahoo, Google, eBay and Apple now offer employees classes in mindful meditation and senior executives including Bill Ford Jr., Michael Stephen, Robert Shapiro and Michael Rennie practice mindful meditation as part of their regimen.

At Green Mountain Coffee Roasters employees can take year round retreats and workshops at Mindfulness Center. GMCR had a return of 3,400% for 10 years, making it one of the best-performing stocks for the period.

Our modern world has become unbalanced, with an excessive focus on doing and speed and multitasking, with little time for just "being" and reflection. Mindfulness can restore that balance to leaders and workplaces.