

LEADING FROM WITHIN: HOW MINDFULNESS DRIVES EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

by Gretchen Ki Steidle

Holding the title of *leader* is something quite different from practicing leadership. My two decades in the mindfulness field and social sector, including as founder of Global Grassroots (www.globalgrassroots.org), a mindfulness-based social venture incubator for women in East Africa, have taught me that what distinguishes a truly transformative leader is both an investment in personal growth and a commitment to a vision greater than

oneself. As much as leadership is frequently measured by accomplishment—even accomplishment of how well one does serving others—it must also be measured in terms of self-awareness and consciousness. This is *leading from within*, and it is critical for leaders involved in creating change, whether within existing institutions or as designers of new solutions. Those of us who have the influence and capacity to change others' lives have a responsibility to create such transformation while

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embodying the same principles of integrity and justice we hope to see in the world. Our outer work will reflect our inner work. And our inner work begins with mindfulness.

Mindfulness

Jon Kabat-Zinn has offered one of the most widely-recognized definitions of mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” Essentially, mindfulness is a form of brain training. It involves taking the time to notice whatever is happening inside ourselves, which can include our physical sensations, emotional states or thoughts, and/or whatever is happening in the external environment. We can do this through a formal practice, such as sitting still and paying focused attention to something like the way we breathe, or bringing a more informal awareness to whatever is happening around us at any moment, like the traffic, birds, or people talking.

Increasing research is demonstrating that mindfulness practices, especially formal meditation, can change the structure and functioning of our brain over time. Benefits include reduced anxiety, decreased depression, greater emotional stability, more positive emotions, and even improved immune system functioning. Essentially, mindfulness helps us let go of our egos, feel happier, be healthier, build better relationships and function better (see Figure 1). Why wouldn't we try it?

Unfortunately, cultivating mindful awareness is not easy or altogether natural for us. A 2010 study by Harvard psychologists Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert documented that on average,

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people spend nearly 47 percent of their waking hours with their minds wandering (and they were less happy when doing so). Being more mindful takes practice, just as getting in shape or learning a new language takes practice. But with time, we can see measurable results.

While many try mindfulness to better manage stress, the benefits go far beyond individual wellbeing to affect the ways leaders approach their work. In this article, I'd like to introduce a new paradigm for advancing social change steeped in mindfulness, which I call *Conscious Social Change*, then explore the five capacities leaders can develop through practicing mindfulness to lead from within and create greater impact.

Conscious Social Change: A New Paradigm

Conventional Change

Conventional approaches to change usually involve compelling people to act with incentives or punitive measures. Such “sticks and carrots” usually last only so long as the reward, punishment, or policy is in effect. For example, studies have shown that for every 10 percent increase in cigarette prices, smoking demand is decreased by 4 percent. While a tax may be an effective deterrent against smoking among certain groups, punitive measures alone will not transform the behavior of heavily addicted smokers. Remove the tax and demand will likely rise again, even among those it did influence.

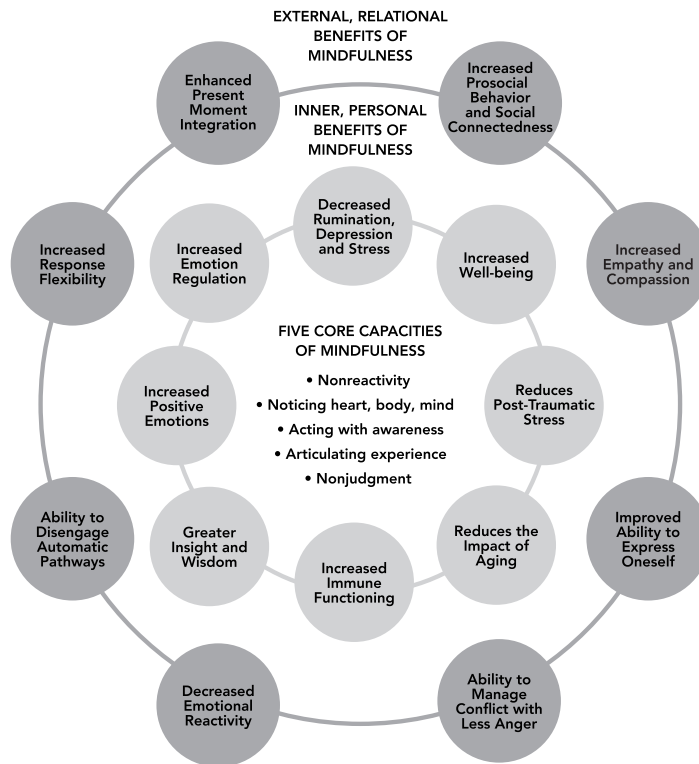


FIGURE 1. BENEFITS AND CAPACITIES OF MINDFULNESS

Conventional change also tends to orient itself with an “us versus them” paradigm that can go so far as to demonize opposition, cause harm, or sabotage progress. For example, U.S. partisan banter frequently blames one party either for enacting decisions without broad support or for obstructing the other’s capacity to take action. Similarly, political rhetoric opposing immigration has increasingly painted a picture of outsiders as dangerous, connected to terrorists, or a drain on the economy. As a result, hardworking families of legitimate refugee status, or citizens of certain ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds, have faced a rise in widespread discrimination. This not only perpetuates division but also can uphold the inequity and disconnect between those of privilege and power, and those without.

Conscious Social Change

While conventional methods may still achieve benefits for targeted groups or swiftly push through legislation, there are other methods that can lead to deeper

transformation with inclusivity, compassion, and connection among a broader stakeholder ecosystem. Conscious social change is a design philosophy and methodology of creative, compassionate problem-solving and solutions-building grounded in mindfulness. As an alternative paradigm, we can use mindfulness to help us understand and engage others more equitably, shifting away from models that divide, blame, or force (see Figure 2).

Conscious social change is driven by leaders who engage in their own efforts toward deeper self-awareness while striving to create positive change for others. This model begins with self-examination. As we increase our self-knowledge, we start to recognize the impact of change in our own lives, and that leads us to understand more clearly how others react to or resist change. From this deeper awareness, conscious social change looks not just at a one-time fix but at the way change can happen that transforms individuals, groups, systems, institutions, and whole societies for the better and long term.

Conscious social change is a more collaborative approach.

Further, conscious social change does not operate with an orientation of *us versus them*. Instead, it recognizes our shared experience, finds ways to heal and connect across divides, actively listens, and facilitates solutions in ways that speak to the underlying essential

nature of people as human beings. Conscious social change is a more collaborative approach. It works to alleviate the root causes of any challenge, not just treat symptoms. And it does so while embracing the wisdom, participation, and leadership of as many stakeholders as possible, especially the most marginalized.

Five Key Capacities of a Conscious Leader

Conscious social change always begins with a process of inner awareness and then turns outward to inform our work with others. There are five key capacities of conscious social change and five questions that can help guide us.

CONVENTIONAL CHANGE MODEL	CONSCIOUS SOCIAL CHANGE MODEL
Outer-driven (we try to achieve what society says we should have—wealth, status, beauty—or we seek approval and direction externally)	Inner-driven (we are driven by what we feel most passionate about and are called to do in the world)
Self-focused (we look at what's in it for us)	Other-focused (we look at how we can benefit the common good)
To create change, we tell or force people, and we are motivated by our needs. This creates a sense of division: us vs. them. We use threats of punishment or rewards to get people to comply with what we want.	To create change, we begin with self-examination to understand how much of the problem is our own, we develop compassion for others, we seek the insight and participation of others in designing a solution, we stay attuned to the changing reality, and we look to collaborate to optimize social value creation.
The results are incremental change within the norms of behavior, often without people changing at a deep level—instead, they are just complying to avoid punishment or to try to get the reward.	The results are systemic change at the root levels and individual transformation that lasts longer-term.

FIGURE 2. CONVENTIONAL CHANGE MODEL VERSUS CONSCIOUS SOCIAL CHANGE MODEL

1. Cultivate Presence: *What Is Happening?*

Conscious change leaders understand their responsibility to advance social justice with awareness, integrity, and compassion—even for their opposition. Thus, the foundation of conscious social change is cultivating presence. This is the fundamental step of quieting, calming, and becoming aware in the present moment. It is the movement away from immediate reaction and toward a profound attention to what is going on. Mindful leaders make a commitment to their personal evolution both through regular solitary practice and through nonstop lessons for growth offered by the external environment and their relationships. This requires discipline, patience, and openness. It is not only reserved for moments when they can get away from the daily routine and go on retreat. They make their contemplative work an integral part of their lifestyle, allowing for both constant learning and intentional renewal.

Practice: How do we do this? As a guide, we use the key question, *what is happening?* We can cultivate presence both in a moment of dedicated silence or in the middle of a moment of reactivity. As a solitary practice, our breath is an easy anchor for our attention. We sit in a comfortable, yet alert position on the floor or in a chair and watch our breathing. We can notice how it feels going in and out of our throat, how deep or shallow it is, and so on. If we notice our mind wandering, we simply bring our attention back to our breathing. I suggest trying this for the first time for seven minutes, the average length of a coffee break, or waking up and using the snooze button as a timer.

Similarly, in a moment where we feel triggered or stressed, we can start by taking one to three breaths to pause. We then ask *what is happening*, as we notice what is arising for us emotionally, mentally and physically. Why is this important? Without recognizing what is happening with our thoughts (e.g., daydreams or worrying), emotions (e.g., anger or embarrassment), or physical experiences (e.g., fatigue or pain), these things can distract us and unconsciously affect how we interact with others. If we are feeling irritated or vulnerable, we

may be cold or short with people. If we are stressed, we may listen poorly. Instead, with increased self-awareness, we can observe these occurrences with greater insight instead of letting them drive us.

2. Become Whole: *What Is True?*

The second capacity is to become whole, where we go beyond just noticing and take action to address our own fears, limiting beliefs, reactivity, and assumptions that can distort our perspective, cause us to act unconsciously, or create harm. Conscious change leaders understand that completely transforming a system requires that we start with ourselves. With practice, mindfulness gives us the power to change our behavior and beliefs more easily so we operate less often on automatic pilot. When shown our blind spots, we can inspire others with self-compassion and humility as opposed to defensive reactivity. As we go through our own shifts, we start to understand what drives other people's behavior, especially the ways they cope with change.

As we change ourselves, the quality of our relationships will also change. Studies show that by practicing mindfulness we can more easily control our reactions, enjoy an improved ability to express ourselves, and increasingly handle conflict with less anger. While still holding individuals accountable, we can more skillfully set aside blame and instead create opportunities for growth and understanding. As leaders, this allows us to connect more deeply and foster greater trust and respect. As we diffuse conflict with patience and empathy, we can forge agreements built on human understanding, making it more likely that we can work towards change as allies rather than opponents. With a deeper, more compassionate understanding of change, we can then make more informed decisions that more effectively inspire transformation in others, whether that is within our organizations or the broader community.

Growing up in a crime-infested section of Los Angeles, Aqeela Sherrills chose gangs as a surrogate family to counter childhood abuse. A personal crisis led him to explore models for social justice and to attempt to use a

mindfulness-based process of reverence and intentional dialogue, to transform gang culture from one of retribution to one of forgiveness and reconciliation. Sherrills's efforts led to a historic 12-year peace-treaty between rival gangs the Bloods and Crips, which drove Los Angeles's murder rate to its lowest in 40 years. Sherrills's Reverence Project has since consulted on peacemaking in Northern Ireland and the Balkans, as well as other U.S. cities. If mindfulness can reduce gang violence, how might it affect our own relationships?

Practice: In developing this capacity for wholeness, we ask ourselves the question *what is true?* to get at the roots of our own inner experience. Where have we been reactive? How have we unintentionally contributed to inequity or conflict? Where have we made an incorrect assumption or held an unreasonable expectation of ourselves or others? Are we too attached to our way of thinking or behaving? What are we afraid of? What are our blind spots?

3. Ensure Well-being: *What Is Needed?*

The third capacity is using self-awareness for ensuring wellbeing. With mindfulness, we can more readily notice when the risk of burnout and disillusionment is detracting from our ability to lead. We are more likely to recognize our own unhealthy coping mechanisms for stress and employ intentional self-care mechanisms for our own restoration instead. As we approach ourselves with less judgment and more curiosity, and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we can extend the same acceptance to others. Moreover, through our example and initiatives, we can foster organizational cultures that support wellbeing for everyone.

Practice: Here we ask the question, what is needed? I encourage leaders to develop a personal self-care plan for mind, heart, body, and spirit to invoke whenever we notice our typical signs of stress. For example, should we recognize we are sleeping fewer than five hours per night several days in a row, getting sick more often, or isolating ourselves from friends and family, we might use this as a signpost for taking a vacation, making time for exercise or another source of mental, emotional or physical renewal.

4. Engage Mindfully: *What Is Helpful?*

The fourth capacity is engaging mindfully. In approaching change more consciously, we honor the inherent wisdom and value of each individual. We avoid imposing our own agenda or punitive measures, which may suppress others' offerings. Drawing from a broader set of perspectives and inviting greater participation across whole ecosystems gives us a more comprehensive and deeper human understanding of an issue as well as of stakeholder needs, ideas, and priorities. As a result, solutions are more likely to be dynamic, innovative, and sustainable given diverse support. We do not measure our success based simply on the scale and profitability of our work. Rather, we evaluate our effectiveness in responding to shifts in the issue and optimally meeting stakeholder needs.

The success of outdoor clothing company Patagonia was built on conscious decision making, from minimizing its environmental impact to promoting a movement known as *mindful consumption*. Mindful consumption invites customers to be thoughtful about their intentions behind what they consume, to consider the impact of each product they buy, and to make purchasing decisions aligned more with what they need versus what they may want. During the last financial crisis, when Patagonia faced the possibility of major layoffs, its leadership realized they were making decisions out of fear rather than compassion. Seeking a more mindful option that would preserve the Patagonia family, the company worked collaboratively to innovate a solution that completely prevented layoffs while positioning Patagonia for long-term growth.

Practice: Here we apply the same process we use for our own personal transformation in determining an organizational or community solution. We explore *what is happening*, *what is true*, and *what is needed*, working collaboratively and systemically to diagnose critical challenges and complex issues at the roots. We now add a fourth question—*what is helpful?*—to determine our best contribution to the whole.

I cover a wide range of practical tools and frameworks for engaging mindfully in my book *Leading from Within: Conscious Social Change and Mindfulness*

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for *Social Innovation* and its companion *Toolkit for Conscious Social Change*—both of which can be found at www.conscioussocialchange.org and contain more than 200 pages of additional design tools and mindfulness practices for the change agent.

5. Lead from Within: *What Is Possible?*

As we invest in our own self-awareness, we begin to lead from within, embodying mindfulness as a leadership ethos. The more we cultivate self-awareness, the more likely we will find our unique purpose or passion. Mindfulness trains us to look at reality with greater curiosity. This openness fosters continual self-improvement and enables us to lead with inspiration, build effective relationships, and design more impactful solutions.

Practice: Leading from within requires a commitment to both an inner and outer transformation process. Building these capacities takes practice, and, like any change, takes time. We invest in regular individual or organizational practices that enable well-being and reflection. We become adept at setting aside ego and bias to inquire and listen. We care for our relationships and social change work, letting them deepen our human understanding. We are unafraid to take informed risks and stretch ourselves. Instead of seeing failure, we question our thinking and examine circumstances with an eagerness to evolve our solutions for greater efficacy. Though there are times when we must act decisively with authority, we are present enough to know when we can take more time to respond with informed wisdom. We are less likely to think our way is the only viewpoint, less likely to create division and blame, and

more likely to seek common ground across difference, energizing, and unifying efforts toward a shared vision. With conflict, we look first at what change may be needed within ourselves. We act with intention and integrity, but let go of what we cannot control. We know how to use our power and potency to speak truth for justice, but we lead with humility, embracing compromise as a step toward progress. Here, the only question left for us to ask is *what is possible?*

Leading from within distinguishes the conscious change agent, and mindfulness is our tool. As we courageously examine and evolve ourselves on the inside, we become more effective in inspiring transformation in others. When mindfulness is applied to social change, it deepens the way we understand issues, build relationships, and innovate solutions. I invite you to consider a new paradigm of inner-driven leadership. All that is needed to get started is a single, conscious breath.



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