

Making Space for Wellbeing: Using Guided Meditation in Leadership Education

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Abstract

Leaders often find themselves encumbered by many challenges. Because of these hurdles, leaders may lose sight of their holistic wellbeing. Wellbeing is a combination of the quality and cumulative effects of work, life, health, relationships, and community. Leaders with higher levels of wellbeing are likely to be more effective, productive, and foster quality relationships with followers. This practice paper details a guided meditation methodology that creates a safe space for leaders to remove mental distractions, reflect on their current state of wellbeing, and develop increased levels of self-awareness. Results to date indicate learners have responded positively to the guided meditation process and have sustained the practice of introspection. Recommendations and implications are discussed.

Introduction

For leaders, the pace and demands are constantly increasing. Meister & Willyard (2010) refer to this phenomenon as “accelerated leadership.” Accelerated leadership is defined as the ability to lead a hyper connected, global workforce that is increasingly diverse, mobile, and digitally linked to one another. In this type of environment, the demands for leaders include the need to

balance work and home, the ability to be digitally confident, foster collaboration amongst diverse followers and achieve goals (Meister & Willyard, 2010). With all of the seemingly disparate demands, many leaders fail to foster not only their own wellbeing, but also that of their employees as well.

Since the mid-20th century, Gallup scientists have sought to identify the components of a life well lived (Rath & Harter, 2010a). The concept of wellbeing captures these components. Wellbeing is a combination of "...our love for what we do each day, the quality of our relationships, the security of our finances, the vibrancy of our physical health, and the pride we take in what we have contributed to our communities" (Rath & Harter, 2010a, p. 4). The five components of wellbeing are career wellbeing (the extent to which daily work is enjoyed), social wellbeing (having and maintaining strong relationships and love in life), financial wellbeing (the extent to which economic life is effectively managed), physical wellbeing (having good health and ample energy to complete daily activities), and community wellbeing (the level of engagement and involvement with the area where one lives).

These five elements of wellbeing are interdependent. Consequently, the presence or absence of each element is cumulative. An individual with low levels of career wellbeing and financial wellbeing will show greater signs of struggle than an individual who reports low levels in just one of those two elements.

Harter, Schmidt, Killham and Agrawal (2009) found that followers who report that their leaders care about them as a person are more likely to be top performers, produce higher quality work, have fewer sick days, and remain committed to the organization. These individuals considered themselves to be engaged in and enjoying their work (career wellbeing) and were twice as likely to be thriving in all the elements of wellbeing compared to those who reported that they were not engaged in their work. Further evidence suggested that individuals struggling in one or more areas of wellbeing (career and physical wellbeing in particular) have distinct negative economic impacts. For instance, individuals who score in the overall lower levels of wellbeing cost an organization \$3,384 in lost annual productivity due to sick days (Rath and Harter, 2010b). On the opposite end of the scale, individuals scoring in the upper levels of wellbeing cost an organization an average of \$840 in lost annual productivity due to sick days (Rath and Harter, 2010b). This difference is also realized in the costs associated with new disease burdens where individuals scoring in the lower levels of overall wellbeing have two-times higher medical costs per year compared to those on the upper end of the wellbeing scale. This research suggests that the effects of both high and low levels of wellbeing are realized in economic, physical and organizational impacts.

Leading a life that balances and fosters wellbeing in all five areas of wellbeing is a key to successful leadership. Swanson (2000) argued that successful leaders will create a balance of mind, body and spirit. Similarly, McClellan (2009) challenged leadership educators to "integrate the physical, the mental, the emotional and the extra-personal selves to achieve integrity and alignment with their spiritual core" (p. 102). McClellan stated that leaders who focused on holistic development transcend self-serving leadership behaviors and are better prepared to focus on the needs and demands of both followers as well as situational and strategic demands.

In a Master of Business Administration course, Delbecq (2000) found that meditation allowed students to integrate personal leadership development with organizational challenges and the

complexities of leading people. Krishnan (2012) examined mid-level managers for both wellbeing and meaning in life. This study found that empowered followers, those who reported higher levels of self-efficacy, saw greater meaning in life, reported higher levels of wellbeing and had increased focus in the workplace. Mellor and Webster (2013) studied the implementation of a comprehensive approach to increasing employee wellbeing. This case study identified enabling factors and challenging factors to striking a balance between occupational objectives and employee wellbeing and suggested that organizations better integrate work and life balance.

This practice paper describes a guided meditation practice that begins with relaxation and guides learners to a reflective place of self-awareness. In leadership education, this methodology seeks to guide learners to a safe inner space of reflection and self-awareness. By allowing learners the safe space to reflect, holistically, upon all aspects of their wellbeing, the intended result is that the learner is more aware of their own authentic wellbeing and how their wellbeing affects followers, peers, and the organization as a whole. Leadership educators utilized a number of nontraditional teaching methodologies to teach leadership (e.g.—Eastwood, 2010; Hickam and Meixner, 2008). This practice paper extends these nontraditional teaching tools to meditation and provides leadership educators with another tool for use in the classroom.

The objectives of this leadership education practice are:

- To develop an appreciation for time to quiet and calm the mind.
- Through guided meditation, develop self-awareness through the inner examination of experiences and/or situations.
- Foster growth in one or more areas of wellbeing through self-awareness.

Background

Generations have practiced and found great value in meditation. Recently, meditation has gained even more widespread acceptance. The purpose of meditation is to assist a person to quiet the mind, to seek to calm one's center and to come into a state of awareness of the present (Boorstein, 1996; McDonald, 1984; Hahn, 1976; Smith, 1998; Suzuki, 1970). McLean (2010) reports educational institutions are finding the value of meditation to maintain cognitive, social and affective development. Businesses are also beginning to discover the value of meditation (Allen, 2009; Biberman & Tischler, 2008; Brackman & Jaffe, 2008; Khalsa, 2002; Traversi, 2007). Some evidence has suggested that meditation has long-term positive psychological effects such as increased focus, better concentration (Benson, 2001). Reddy (2013) stated that meditating just 12 minutes each day increases cognitive function and mental acuity. One additional benefit of meditation is increasing self-awareness. Whetten and Cameron (2007) claim that self-awareness is a key component of and a prerequisite for successful leadership and is a particularly important function of a CEO. Using a guided meditation approach allows leaders to focus their meditation on specific areas of need or issues, which may increase the likelihood of immediate positive outcomes of the meditation.

Guided meditation begins with relaxation and then guides the person toward specific inner experiences (e.g., imaginative situations, and thought processes). Over the years, the authors have created experiential exercises using guided meditation for organizational behavior and

leadership courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels. By adding a guided meditation/self-reflective/self-awareness phase into the classroom, learners have been given the opportunity to be better able to visualize their past, present and/or future and have gained a better understanding of what they want to learn and ask concerning a variety of leadership challenges. Guided meditation can help leaders face the future with less anxiety, leading to a more productive personal and professional work life and increased levels of overall wellbeing. The following section details the process for using guided meditation in the leadership classroom.

Description of the Practice

The authors have developed a number of different experiential exercises using guided meditation. One example, provided in Appendix A, includes using guided meditation to develop learning objectives for adult learners. In this exercise participants are lead through a series of meditation questions such as: asking the participants to “remember a specific situation that was a major learning experience for you, and imagine yourself fully in the scene.” What was the situation? What exactly happened? Who were you with? What was said? What was the context? Why was the situation such a powerful learning experience? What did you learn? What was important? How did you feel? What did you decide to do?

Other experiential exercises using guided meditation developed by the authors include exercises to help improve one’s emotional intelligence – by helping the participant become more self-aware, another exercise was devoted to conflict resolution and stress reduction – in this exercise the participants were led through a series of questions where they had to examine a situation that was causing them much conflict and to visualize the situation with less conflict. Lastly the authors have used, on a number of occasions, an exercise to help improve communication. Again the same model of guided meditation – examines the past, and develops a plan for the future-- was used.

Each exercise begins with a progressive relaxation exercise. Once the participant is relaxed, we have them imagine a situation in the past, present and/or future. Participants are asked to spend some time in this state noting such things as feelings, sights, smells and sounds. This process will put them in a very relaxed mental state with few distractions, so their mind and imagination can roam more freely than usual. We follow the exercise with a series of questions for them to consider. At the end of the meditation/journaling process we often close with an open discussion allowing students to comment on what came up for them. By hearing each other’s experiences students should learn from each other, increase their self-confidence, and find solutions to help them with similar situations in the future.

We often find the guided meditation process takes about 40 minutes. The guided meditation itself takes approximately 15-20 minutes. Writing answers on the questionnaire takes about ten minutes. The discussion ranges vary for each exercise. It is important to have as many students involved in the verbal discussion as possible, thus, giving them the time to learn from one another. A comprehensive sample of one particular exercise using guided meditation can be found in Appendix A.

Results to Date

Guided meditation processes have been presented both in the classroom and at various academic conferences (Biberman & McKeage, 2005; McKeage & Biberman, 2010). This guided meditation practice has also been used in a mentoring situation. The purpose of this specific session was to assist the student protégé in becoming more self-reflective and to become more aware of their inner needs, wants and desires. At the conclusion of the mentoring workshop, participants gave strong support and feedback for use of this methodology. This particular method has also been used successfully in the leadership classroom on numerous occasions. We recommend concluding the exercise with a journal writing phase and discussion. A sample of questions for journal prompts is provided in Appendix B. It is in this phase of the exercise that we begin to see and hear reactions. Whether it serves to help a student raise their self-awareness to become more emotionally intelligent, to help them deal with a difficult stressful situation at school/work, or to help them plan for a meeting with their mentor, most will say guided meditation helps them feel better prepared for these life events. One of the most rewarding comments heard from students is that they have found success in the issue they were facing. A sample of the comments often heard are reports that meditation helps “clear their mind” and to results in better focus. Students often report feeling more relaxed and calm after the guided meditation. “Confident” is a word often heard from students in describing the effects of meditation. Recently one student reported that with all the busyness of day to day life in school, the guided meditation gave him a chance to think about the future. This gave him great joy. Finally, some students told us they plan to continue to meditate on their own after our training.

Recommendations and Implications

In any given day, leaders are pulled in seemingly disparate directions and are simultaneously expected to build and maintain positive relationships with followers. The moments where leaders can stop, clear the mind, and process are seldom and fleeting. Rath and Harter (2010) contended that because of these demands, leaders have lost a holistic view of their life and this leads to a detriment for the organization. Creating a safe space and the necessary time to examine one’s level of wellbeing on all five of the elements of wellbeing is critical to leadership success and having a life well-lived.

Recommendations

For leadership educators, being explicit about importance and necessity of reflection and introspection creates awareness for learners. In leadership classes and development opportunities, integrate time for introspection and reflection. It may be the case that educators focus too much time on delivering content while face-to-face with students and less time on reflection opportunities. However, educators can model the importance and utility of reflection and introspection thereby increasing the likelihood that leaders will practice this important behavior in the course of daily events.

Prior to engaging in a meditation exercise, it is important for leadership educators to prepare learners to fully engage in the activity. If a learner is new to meditation, challenge the learner to try a new activity in a safe space. Describing the opportunity to reflect and the outcomes of

increased self-awareness and increased overall wellbeing creates buy-in. In addition, the instructor fully describing the activity before taking the learners through the meditation experience aids in calming nerves and reducing any negative stigma or preconceived notion associated with meditation.

Leadership educators may find the environment to be an important component of this activity. It is recommended that educators create an environment that is conducive to the comfort necessary to this deep introspection. This may include lowering the lights, allowing learners to move from chairs and encouraging wearing comfortable clothing. Special consideration should be given to the atmosphere prior to engaging in this activity.

Implications

Guided meditation creates a state where learners have fewer mental distractions and are able to more purposefully reflect on specific leadership situations. Perhaps the most important effect of this activity is the opportunity for educators to encourage reflection and introspection. With the number of demands and distractions that pull leaders in different directions, time for quiet reflection is often lost. Using guided meditation in the formal learning environment sets the tone for utilizing this activity in practice.

Reflection itself is important in creating more balanced and self-aware leaders (Badaracco, 2002). Initial results of the guided meditation practice suggest that leaders who make time for introspection are better able to consider their wellbeing in a more holistic way. Guided meditation can be used to guide learners through reflective situations in each one of the five areas of wellbeing. This focus on each of the five facets of wellbeing creates increased self-awareness and the ability to self-correct. Increased self-awareness and the ability to self-correct may prevent burnout and allow leaders to live a more healthy, happy, and productive life.

The concept of mindfulness is increasingly predominant in the leadership and organizational development literature. Garms (2013) defined mindfulness as “an ability to regulate one’s attention—focusing on one’s thoughts and emotions” (p. 32). These authors suggest that leaders who engage in mindfulness have greater attention, more clarity, increased emotional intelligence, and better management of daily challenges. Leaders who are seen as having greater mindfulness are seen as being more effective.

Badaracco (2002) argued that when a leader engages in quiet and reflective activities, this behavior has a trickle-down effect in the organization. Leaders can create an organizational culture where reflection leads to increased self-awareness. Fostering a culture of reflection and self-awareness in an organization can then be framed in the five aspects of wellbeing. Ultimately, organizations and employees within organizations may experience positive results including increased economic prosperity, improved physical wellness, and more positive and effective relationships. Walmsley, Hockey, Kitsell, and Sewell (2012) concurred with this sentiment while studying an international fellowship placement program. These authors found that holistic focus in leadership development led to greater success for the fellows.

Adopting guided meditation as a leadership education practice allows educators and trainers to effectively create a safe space for learners to practice reflection and introspection with the focus on improving self-awareness and, ultimately, wellbeing. Conclusions from the research provided

above find solid evidence that wellbeing leads to more effective leaders with greater focus, better mental acuity, healthier lifestyles (and therefore fewer absences from work), and increased emotional intelligence.

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Appendix A

Sample Guided Meditation Exercise

Adapted from McKeage, Tischler, & Biberman, J. (2013)

An Exercise to help Student Protégés increase self-awareness in a Mentor Relationship.

First Meditation

Step 1: Facilitated Meditation (15-20 minutes.)

Participants are asked to sit comfortably and quietly with their eyes closed. The participants are then led through a progressive relaxation exercise. When relaxed, participants are then will led through the following guided meditation:

- Imagine yourself 5 years from now doing some kind of work that you really enjoy and feel good about. What kind of work are you doing? Who, if anyone, is with you? What are the sights, sounds, smells, etc? What is making you feel good about the work?
- Now imagine you could talk to an expert in this work. Imagine you are sitting down with such an expert, and that you have the opportunity to ask that expert up to three questions to help you find even more joy, meaning, and success in your work.
- Imagine you are asking the first question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?
- Imagine you are asking the second question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?
- Imagine you are asking the third question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?

- Note that you can return to this expert for future help.
- Slowly open your eyes.

Step 2: (10 minutes) Participants complete the Journal Writing Questionnaire.

Step 3: (5 minutes) Participants give their reaction to the exercise.

Second Meditation

Step 1: Facilitated Meditation (15 minutes.)

Participants are asked to sit comfortably and quietly with their eyes closed. The participants are then led through a progressive relaxation exercise. When relaxed, participants are then will led through the following guided meditation:

- Imagine you are talking to the same expert that you talked to in your previous meditation about your work that you are doing five years from now that you really enjoy and feel good about. If you didn't have one appear to you last time, one will appear this time. Imagine you are sitting down again with this expert, and that you have the opportunity to now ask this expert what three specific things you can do with or ask your current mentor that can move you toward more joy, meaning, and success in your work after college.
- Imagine you are asking the first question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?
- Imagine you are asking the second question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?

- Imagine you are asking the third question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?
- Note that you can return to this expert for future help.
- Slowly open your eyes.

Step 2: (10 minutes) Participants are asked to answer as many questions on the handout as they can on the Journal Writing Questionnaire handout.

Step 3: (5 minutes) Participants give their reaction to the exercise.

Third Meditation

Step 1: Facilitated Meditation (15 minutes.)

Participants are asked to sit comfortably and quietly with their eyes closed. The participants are then led through a progressive relaxation exercise. When relaxed, participants are then will led through the following guided meditation:

- Imagine you are talking to your current mentor. Imagine you are sitting down with your mentor, and that you have the opportunity to now ask your mentor what three specific things you can do with or ask this mentor that can move you toward more joy, meaning, and success in your work after college.
- Imagine you are asking the first question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?
- Imagine you are asking the second question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?

- Imagine you are asking the third question. What question are you asking? What, if any, answers are you getting?
- Slowly open your eyes.

Step 2: (10 minutes) Participants are asked to answer as many questions on the handout as they can on the Journal Writing Questionnaire handout.

Step 3: (5 minutes) Participants give their reaction to the exercise.

Appendix B

Sample Journal Writing Questionnaire

Please write out answers to the following:

- 1.) Where did you imagine yourself in 5 years? What was the situation? What kind of work were you doing? What made you feel good about that kind of work?
- 2.) Who was the person (expert) to whom you asked your questions? Describe him/her.
- 3.) What were the 3 questions you asked? What answer, if any, did you receive to each question?

Question 1:

Question 2:

Question 3:

- 4.) In view of the questions you asked and the answers you received, what would you like to get out of the mentoring process? What specific skills and knowledge would you like to gain from your mentor?
- 5.) What new insight(s) did you gain about yourself from this guided meditation/journaling process?

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