

HOW TO RECAPTURE LEADERSHIP'S LOST MOMENT

Lili Powell & Jeremy Hunter

The meeting is a big one with a high-value client. You and your team have prepared for weeks to deliver a set of recommendations and it **MUST** go well. Everything starts as planned and you're feeling good.

Without warning, the meeting confronts an unexpected point of conflict. You grow tense. Then suddenly, someone on your team makes an ill-chosen remark that escalates the tension.

The room convulses as waves of anger bounce off the walls. The pounding in your chest and the vice-like feeling around your forehead tells you the wave has penetrated you too. The client gathers their papers to leave. The meeting is headed off the rails.

NOW what?

As the leader, what happens next depends on your in-the-moment awareness. You must simultaneously

manage yourself as you read and manage the scene. The moment demands you recognize what's happening and respond with sensitivity and good judgment.

What's riding on this moment of truth? Only your relationship with the client, your company's reputation, a financial contract, and possibly your job.

Defining leadership moments like this happen in a flash. And yet the real experiential skills that moments like these require are rarely ever systematically taught to leaders. Instead, leaders are left to learn them through trial and error, or not at all. People often use a catch-all colloquial term, chalking up this kind of inefficient and sometimes ineffective learning to "Experience."

Yet moments are when and where life happens, and as Chip Heath and Dan Heath point out in their 2017 book *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact*, some are deeply memorable. But living and leading through them are

another thing. They are often messy and unpredictable. Perhaps because so many moments are slippery, ordinary, or not so memorable, moments are often a forgotten element in leadership development.

To recapture leadership's lost moment, leaders can learn to refocus on their immediate experience so they can lead more mindfully. Our approach emphasizes using intention, attention, and awareness to act and perform skillfully and dynamically in real time. Using diverse practices ranging from meditation, yoga, athletics, and the performing arts, leaders can learn to experience a moment in a high-definition way that increases the potential for better choices and leadership results.

Independently over the last 20 years, we have each incorporated these ideas and methods into our leadership teaching and consulting. Beginning in 2014, we have collaborated to create and refine what we call a "leading mindfully" approach, sharing it primarily through executive education programs offered through the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business.

The leading mindfully approach is supported by academic research that continues to grow. For example, in the 2016 article "Mindfulness in Organizations: A Cross-Level Review," in *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, Timothy J. Vogus, and Erik Dane found that "mindfulness is neither mysterious nor mystical, but rather can be reliably and validly measured, linked to an array of individual and organizational outcomes, and induced through meditative and non-meditative practices and processes at the individual and collective levels." Indeed, in the same year, a report from Ashridge Executive Education/Hult, "The Mindful Leader," by Megan Reitz, Michael Chaskalson, Sharon Olivier, and Lee Waller found that these skills develop an increased capacity for resilience and collaboration in complex times.

How to Fumble a Defining Moment

The ability to discern a passing moment from a defining moment is an essential leadership skill. The

ancient Greeks—notably the rhetoricians Isocrates and Aristotle—differentiated these two kinds of moments; where Chronos signifies a moment as a unit of time, Kairos signifies a moment as a unique opening that requires a timely, appropriate, and creative response. Therefore, Kairos, or defining moments, are perceived differently and demand effective action and meaning.

Unfortunately, most of us have seen (or have been) a leader who misses this distinction and the opportunity to respond skillfully to a defining moment. How can something so seemingly obvious to others be missed?

As Harvard University psychology professor Ellen Langer's pioneering research on mindlessness demonstrated, human beings—including leaders—operate on automatic pilot much of the time. When on autopilot, a leader just might be minimally aware of the moment, especially if working attention is tied up in distraction or overfocused on a goal or threat.

Going back to our opening leadership scene, which is based on an actual event, the leader, Janine, is a partner in a respected financial services firm. It's worth pausing to consider how Janine could have mindlessly fumbled the defining moment unfolding in front of her. In a situation like this one, it would be hard to blame all-out distraction. But in our experience the moment could be easily missed because Janine fails to recognize how her own nervous system could hijack her behavior.

If a stressful moment triggers a leader's fight-flight-freeze survival mechanism and results in mindless reaction, that's a recipe for a fumbled defining moment. Let's look at different ways the situation could play out, depending upon potential survival reactions we have seen in other leaders.

For example, in a situation like this, Janine could freeze. She might gasp and hold her breath, so stunned that she does not know how to respond. She falls into a case of leadership shutdown. Her paralysis leaves a leadership vacuum, an opening that someone else might fill but that just as likely is missed altogether. The client feels insulted and leaves in a huff. The team is left to look around the room and point fingers.

Or under pressure, Janine might flee. Perhaps she does not physically escape, but avoids stepping into the conflict by brushing it aside and smoothing hurt feelings. She coaxes the client to stay. Begrudgingly everyone stays in the room but fakes their way through the rest of the conversation. Outwardly everyone pretends that nothing happened while inwardly they're disturbed and distracted. The meeting concludes, at which point everyone does flee the room.

Or under pressure, Janine might fight. Though she may initially fight her own urge, she snaps angrily at her team member, shutting them down. Or in agreement with her team member, she piles onto the client too. She misses the leadership opening because now she's been inappropriate. Her mindless reaction has made an awkward moment much worse. The client meets anger with anger and retaliates. They leave. A relationship, reputation, business, and maybe her job are destroyed.

Thus, a defining moment not only requires an essential recognition that the moment has shifted from Chronos into Kairos. It also requires that we have the wherewithal to manage our body's automatic fight-flight-freeze response, keep our wits about us, and respond in a way that can transform the situation from bad to better, not worse.

Leading Mindfully: A Guide in an Unscripted World

There are no easy and available scripts for defining moments such as these. In a way, the lack of an available script marks what makes a defining moment a defining moment.

Leaders can learn to improvise more effectively and lead more mindfully during defining moments with know-how and practices that can serve as a guide to action. First, picture leading mindfully as we do in Figure 1. Here the infinity loop depicts how a leader's inner experience and outer behavior are linked and dynamically influence each other throughout a given moment.

Explicitly paying attention to how our inner experience and outer behavior are dynamically connected improves

Some leadership development focuses primarily or solely on inner experience.

on two common ways leadership development is often approached.

For example, some leadership development focuses primarily or solely on inner experience. But personality and trait-based approaches risk people getting stuck in analysis and potential inaction. For instance, what if I learn I am an introvert? Knowing this alone doesn't address how I internally and externally manage a response that requires me to act in an out-going way. Readiness to move into action requires managing the fear of being depleted that can also keep me stuck. And it also requires actually moving into action rather than just resting in self-awareness alone.

Other leadership development approaches focus primarily or solely on outer behavior. However,

Foundations of Leading Mindfully

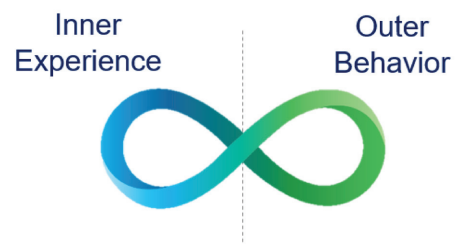


FIGURE 1. A LEADER'S INNER EXPERIENCE AND OUTER BEHAVIOR ARE LINKED AND DYNAMICALLY INFLUENCE EACH OTHER THROUGHOUT A GIVEN MOMENT

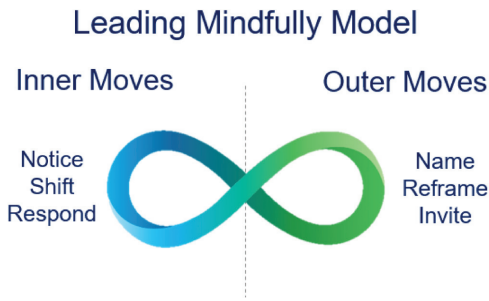


FIGURE 2. MAKING SKILLFUL INNER MOVES FORMS A BASIS FOR SKILLFUL AND EFFECTIVE OUTER MOVES THROUGH A DEFINING MOMENT

such behavioral or action-oriented approaches may bypass inner experience. This risks people acting from unmanaged unconscious reactions. For example, you may fail to see how judgments, assumptions, or biased emotions are distorting your assessment of a situation and ability to effectively respond. Or they may feel inauthentic, force to act in ways that are deemed to be “effective” but that don’t fit their inner experience or values.

Instead of focusing on inner experience or outer behavior without acknowledging the existence of the other side, the leading mindfully model redirects the leader’s attention to the dynamic way inner experience and outer behavior are in constant conversation.

With this approach, leaders learn to improve their ability to inquire into themselves and manage their inner experience so that they can act and interact more effectively in the world. They can move from a simple awareness of inner experience and outer behavior while leading to practicing “inner moves” and “outer moves” that result in better choices and better results. For example, as we show in Figure 2, mindless survival reactions can be replaced with inner moves we call “notice, shift, respond” and outer moves we call “name, reframe, invite.”

Developmentally, inner work helps leaders cultivate a higher quality of in-the-moment attention and awareness of what they are experiencing internally. Inner work begins by recognizing and managing survival and stress reactions. With practice, the leader advances toward making “inner moves” that promote

greater mental and emotional clarity and therefore improved readiness for effective action.

Inner moves can then be leveraged to make more skillful choices and more effective “outer moves.” Through skillful outer moves, a leader does not mindlessly react but responds more consciously. More conscious responses improve the probability of more effective action and interaction. Leaders can then shift from directing their own attention to directing the collective attention of others in a way that is less destructive and more constructive.

At a more advanced level, leaders train themselves to place attention simultaneously on their inner experience and outer behavior. They can do this by shifting to observing the interplay between the two. This allows leaders to recognize what is going on inside them while also adjusting to the outer needs of the moment.

At the most advanced levels of practice, the model helps grow awareness beyond ourselves to include others and the situation as a whole, as shown in Figure 3. Increasing the scope of awareness raises the potential to more effectively engage others and transform a difficult situation.

At its best, leading mindfully improves the quality of collective attention so teams of people can make better coordinated choices that produce better results. Clarity and focus in the leader raises the potential for clarity and focus in the team. An aligned and coordinated team is much more likely to produce desired results.

Leading Mindfully in Action (and Interaction)

The leading mindfully approach helps leaders get beyond freezing, fleeing, or fighting. More capable of managing their inner game, leaders find the mental and emotional wherewithal to respond effectively in the moment. Being more attuned to self and to others, leaders increase their ability to acknowledge what’s happening and to transform a difficult situation into a constructive one.

Collective Attention Improves

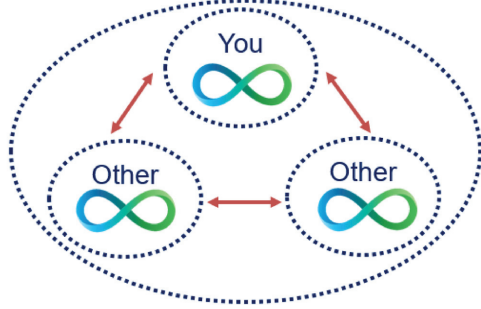


FIGURE 3. LEADING MINDFULLY AT A PERSONAL LEVEL CAN GRADUATE TO AWARENESS OF OTHERS AND THE SITUATION AS A WHOLE

Going back to our leader Janine, let's see in slow motion and high definition how she actually responded. First, she manages her inner experience and makes several inner moves. Immediately Janine *Notices* her own distress and employs a few deeper breaths to steady herself. Doing this, she inwardly *Shifts* her reactive nervous system. Now she sees more clearly her colleague's frustration and her client's sense of insult. Now she is aware the situation has suddenly gone from constructive to destructive. Without undue alarm, this presence of mind allows her to think clearly on her feet. Inwardly, she *Responds* with her practiced intention to assume positive intent, to interpret generously, and to act with goodwill. Now she can respond outwardly to the scene, in part by narrating her inner experience and moves.

Outwardly, Janine verbalizes and performs several outer moves that sound like this:

Okay, time out. We have hit an uncomfortable moment. Let's work through this together. Bob (client), I'm not sure I would put it the way my colleague Chris did, but he has a good point. I see you are taken aback, but please hear us out. As we see it, this recommendation drives at the heart of the changes we see your company needing to make, and the urgency of now is upon us. We know this challenges business as usual—and we acknowledge that changing habitual ways of operating can be hard—but if we are all honest with ourselves, that's why you hired us. So let's get to work to understand the issues, knowing that we will be better off resolving them together.

Simply knowing the leading mindfully model conceptually won't be sufficient.

Thus, Notice, Shift, Respond inner moves pave the way for powerful outer moves. By noticing what's happening in the moment, she outwardly *Names* what is present in the room and acknowledges that it's a defining moment. Then she shifts to a steadier inner stance that allows her to *Reframe* what the group pays attention to, redirecting their attention from the immediate discomfort in the present moment to the real purpose of their work together. Her ability to respond in the moment by stepping into the conflict with an attitude of learning *Invites* the group to respond in kind. While she notices, shifts, and responds on the inside, she skillfully leads the group through the moment with corresponding outer moves—name, reframe, invite.

Practicing Leading Mindfully

Simply knowing the leading mindfully model conceptually won't be sufficient. It must be practiced and incorporated into your leadership repertoire. By "incorporate," we mean quite literally to embody the idea. Like building a muscle, start small, build up reps, and challenge, until you have worked up to higher levels of strength and application. This way, you have built up the strength before a momentary or on-going crisis hits. That's why we recommend starting with "solo practice," and then graduating to "low stakes," and then "high-stakes" practice. And if you do find yourself in a crisis, then there's no time like the present to dive in.

Catch your mind's plaintive refrains.

In our example, Janine finds herself in a high-stakes situation. But this is no time for her to run down the hall and meditate for 20 minutes. Instead, she can improve her odds of responding skillfully in real time by investing in solid solo and low-stakes practice before the defining moment arrives.

If you want to get started on this developmental path, first understand and then learn how to manage your own nervous system.

What does this mean? The human body's autonomic nervous system has two basic controls that act as an accelerator and a brake. The sympathetic nervous system is sensitive to triggers in our environment, but also in our own minds. The sympathetic nervous system is the accelerator that accounts for our ability to "get up and go." This is the part of the body that when overstimulated or "spun-up" leads to the fight-flight-freeze response.

In contrast, the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) acts as a brake, slowing the nervous system down when it has become overstimulated. Sometimes the switch from sympathetic to parasympathetic response happens on its own. But because our modern world tends generally toward overactivation, we gain from developing greater skill in switching to our brake. Activating the brake is what Janine employed when she practiced the inner moves of noticing to shifting to responding.

In practice, we recommend three methods for accessing the PNS brake. They all start by noticing reactions to triggers in the heat of a defining moment.

- *Notice your body.* Recognizing the signals from your body that tell you you've shifted into a

survival mode—such as clenched shoulders/fists/jaw/lower back, increased heart rate, racing thoughts, rapid, shallow or no breathing, heat in the face, or "seeing red." You'll notice you have your own signature reactions.

- *Notice your thoughts or stories.* Other times thoughts or stories running through your head stand out most. Catch your mind's plaintive refrains. "What's *with* this person?" "I'm losing control." "I'm so incompetent." Often these voices reflect a pattern that we could label as our "inner critic."
- *Notice your emotions.* Other times emotions may be the first thing you notice. What's present for you in this moment? Do an inventory for typical emotional reactions in defining moments, such as defensiveness, frustration, irritation, anger, impatience, judgment, indifference, or lethargy.

Giving attention to your inner experience is like paying attention to the warning light on your vehicle's dashboard. As you get better at this you'll notice the warning light earlier and earlier making it less onerous to take in the information and change direction.

In our view, noticing reactions opens up the possibility for shifting and responding, which can begin with shifts at the level of the body, thoughts/stories, or emotions.

- *Shift into a grounded body.* When your nervous system feels activated, shift into a more grounded and resourceful body. Shift your attention to places your body feels solid. Feel your feet connected to the floor, your rump in your seat. Go so far as to place your hands on your knees, the arms of a chair, or on a table. While in this position, take a few quiet breaths with emphasis on a long exhale. Long exhalations in particular help to switch into parasympathetic or brake mode. Patiently sit with your discomfort and allow it to dissolve into a more neutral physical base. As you do this, let your attention follow, spreading from the extreme "self-preservation mode" to a more open relational mode that helps you take the temperature of the room.

- *Shift into a productive mind-set.* When you catch yourself with an often repeated mental phrase like “What’s *with* this person?” recognize that this thought comes from a judgment that represents an unproductive fixed mind-set. Instead, shift into a more productive stance of learning and a growth mind-set. Ask, “What does this person need right now?” or “What’s the best outcome we can create together?”
- *Shift into goodwill.* In the heat of a defining moment, emotional reactions like defensiveness are seated in fear and can manifest as harm, to ourselves and other people. But our better selves know that productive conflict rarely comes from acting out of fear or the desire to harm. The antidote can be shifting emotionally to somewhere on the spectrum between neutral and goodwill.



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Conclusion

Leading mindfully begins simply and profoundly. Doing the inner work of noticing reactions, you can shift into more productive stances for action. Fueled by more productive intentions, you can increase the odds of moving skillfully into more productive actions. Skillful action then becomes a basis for skillful interaction and coordinated action toward a common goal, which of course is what leadership is really all about. A moment that could have been lost in mindless reaction is recaptured. Go make the most of your defining moments.

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Jeremy Hunter, PhD, serves as the founding director of the Executive Mind Leadership Institute as well as associate professor of practice at the Peter F. Drucker Graduate School of Management, Claremont Graduate University. For nearly two decades, he has helped leaders transform themselves while retaining their humanity in the face of monumental change and challenge. He has designed and led leadership development programs for a wide variety of organizations, including Fortune 200 aerospace, Fortune 50 banking and finance, accounting, the arts and civic nonprofits.