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LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: MINDFULNESS AND LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Abstract:

Although research exploring the linkages between mindfulness and leadership has increased steadily, very little attention has been focused on the relationship between mindfulness and specific leadership development approaches. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2012a, 2012b; Posner, 2016) is one such widely used leadership development approach, and the purpose of this paper is to offer some insights into how mindfulness could enhance leadership development programs that use the LPI. Specifically, we investigated the relationship between mindfulness and the leadership practices included in the LPI, while controlling for personality characteristics. In this quantitative, cross-sectional study, data were collected from 106 business professionals enrolled in an MBA program at a university in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. The results show that mindfulness is positively associated with two of the leadership practices, challenging the process and inspiring a shared vision. The practical implications of this study suggest that integrating a mindfulness program in LPI based leadership training will support the effectiveness of the training.

Keywords:

Leadership, Mindfulness, Development

JEL Classification: M10, M12, J24

Introduction

Leadership development is an integral component of most management development programs (Cacioppe, 1998; Leskiw & Singh, 2007; Packard & Jones, 2015). Relatedly, Kouzes and Posner (1987; 2002, 2003, 2007, 2012a, 2012b) proposed a comprehensive approach to developing leaders based on five leadership practices: modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. Although the effectiveness of this approach has been documented (e.g., Abuh-Tineh et al., 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Posner, 1993, 2016), the contextual factors that may support or hinder the effectiveness of this program have yet to be studied.

Mindfulness is an attention-focusing practice that has been shown to increase self- and social awareness, self-regulation of behavior and emotions, and emotional intelligence (Bao et al., 2015; Bishop et al., 2004; Schutte & Malouff, 2011). These findings have led Stedham and Skaar (2019) to suggest that mindfulness may be essential to leadership via its impact on a person's ability to build trust and positive relationships.

In this study, we investigate the relationship between mindfulness and the leadership practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (1987; 2012a, 2012b). We propose that mindfulness facilitates engagement in these practices. The results of this study may offer preliminary support for the integration of mindfulness training into Kouzes and Posner's leadership development program.

Literature Review

Leadership Practices

Bryman (1992) has articulated a leadership approach that focuses on vision, values, ethics, and relationships – akin to transformational leadership (Parrott, 2000). Transformational leadership focuses on how people are changed (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By being attentive to the needs and motives of individual followers, empowering them, and helping them to reach their full potential, transformational leaders inspire followers to develop their own leadership capacity (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978).

Kouzes and Posner (1987; 2002; 2012a, 2012b) introduced five leadership practices that describe transformational leadership: modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. *Modeling the way* characterizes how the leader clarifies their own values, acts as a role model, follows through on commitments, and affirms common shared values. *Inspiring a shared vision* involves communication of the leader's vision to followers while incorporating the followers' dreams for the future. For a vision to energize all, it must be shared by the leader and their followers. This is not to be confused with getting followers to buy into the leader's ideas. On the contrary, this is about creating a compelling vision that guides both the leader and followers. *Challenging the process* relates to questioning accepted practices and the leader's willingness to take risks while creating an environment where followers feel free to engage in creative problem solving and try out new ways of doing things. *Enabling others to act* refers to behaviors that promote collaboration and empowerment. Finally, *encouraging the heart* focuses on the recognition of accomplishments and celebrations of group successes.

For management and leadership development purposes, Kouzes and Posner (1987; 2002; 2003a; 2012a, 2012b) created an assessment tool, the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI), that measures the level of individual engagement in the five leadership practices.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a mental state characterized by non-judgmental awareness of the present moment experience, including one's thoughts, bodily states, consciousness, and the environment, while encouraging openness, curiosity, and acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). It involves noticing, without attachment or aversion, what is happening in a given moment in the outer and inner environment. This type of attention results in increased self- and social awareness (Bishop et al. 2004; Coholic, 2011; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012; Walach et al., 2006). Mindfulness includes meta-attention or meta-cognition, i.e., the awareness of having thoughts and of the origins of thoughts (Carmody et al., 2009). Expanding upon the idea of meta-cognition, Hayes et al. (2011) emphasize that mindfulness involves the ability to observe one's own emotions and thoughts without getting absorbed by them and flexibly attending to the present moment. Hence, Bishop et al. (2004) suggest that mindfulness can be divided in two components: regulation of attention and approaching the experience with a neutral attitude.

First, mindfulness allows for observing an event and one's emotional reaction to the event objectively. This may result in the reconstruction of a negative or stressful event. Such reappraisal is a form of emotional regulation. This self-regulation of emotion refers to how individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them (Gross, 1998). Hölzel et al. (2011) found that mindfulness practice improves emotion regulation because the practitioner learns to turn toward rather than avoid unpleasant stimuli, including unkind emotions. A result of that exposure is the discovery that unpleasant emotions are transient, and a sense of safety or well-being can be experienced in their place. Such non-reactivity can free the individual from habitual emotional reactions.

Second, mindfulness is also associated with behavior regulation (Brown & Ryan, 2003, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1980; Ryan, 2005). Internal and external stimuli are observed without judgment which allows for regulation of action through the provision of choice that is informed by abiding needs, values, and feelings and their fit with situational options and demands (Brown et al., 2007: 223). Mindfulness-based awareness results in more flexible, adaptive responses, and contributes to the reduction of automatic, habitual, or impulsive reactions (Bishop et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2004).

Most importantly, Goleman and Davidson (2017) suggest that mindfulness is a skill that can be developed by engaging in certain exercises such as meditation. Much evidence exists for the effectiveness of meditation in the development of mindfulness and its associated behaviors and attributes (Davidson et al., 2003; Gunaratana, 2011; Siegel, 2010). A common meditation exercise (mindfulness practice) is simple breath-focused attention meditation. Other practices include Hatha yoga, body scan, and walking meditation.

Mindfulness and Leadership

Boyatzis (2015) presents a comprehensive summary of the research on mindfulness and leadership. Researchers have found a positive association between mindfulness and leader flexibility (Baron et al., 2018) as well as with empathy and building meaningful relationships (Boyatzis et al., 2013; Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Decety & Michalska, 2010; Goleman, 2013). Further, mindfulness has been shown to facilitate leader effectiveness by increasing the leader's ability to focus attention on the present moment and to act with intentionality (Reb et al., 2015; Sauer & Kohls, 2011). Discussing the relationship between mindfulness and leadership, Dunoon and Langer (2011) point to the importance of alertness to multiple perspectives, active self-appraisal, and attentiveness to our use of language.

Related research on leadership development has uncovered the benefits of including mindfulness in leadership programs. Rupprecht et al. (2019) found that mindfulness positively impacted leaders' capacity to relate to others and to adapt to change while improving their ability for self-reflection and self-care. Similarly, participants in leadership training based on mindfulness experienced increased ability to collaborate and higher levels of resilience (Reitz et al., 2020). Finally, Brendal et al. (2016) have showed that regular mindfulness practice has a positive impact on leaders' regulatory focus, trait anxiety, and stress.

Overall, the research on leadership and mindfulness offers two primary insights: (1) effective leaders see clearly without distortions, are aware of their own emotions and filters, have empathy, and can create and manage relationships that result in community and synergy; (2) A mindful leader is self-aware, socially aware, calm, and consistent in actions (Boyatzis et al., 2013; Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

Hypotheses

The above research findings on mindfulness and leadership suggest that mindfulness may facilitate the development of and the engagement in the behaviors associated with the leadership practices described by the LPI. Mindfulness facilitates beneficial leadership behaviors through the mindfulness processes. We suggest that the underlying, theoretical rationale for the relationship between mindfulness and leadership practices is based on the following mindfulness processes:

(1)   Focus on the present moment experience: Paying attention to internal (self-awareness) and external (social awareness and context) stimuli.

(2)   Decentering and non-identification: The experience is approached with neutrality, openness, a receptive attitude, and curiosity, resulting in flexible attending.

(3)   Awareness of impermanence and transience: Accepting experiences as they are.

(4)   Re-appraisal and re-perceiving: Resulting in response options.

(5)   Self-regulation of emotions and behavior: Non-reactivity and behavioral flexibility.

The LPI comprises five practices: modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. Collectively, these practices represent transformational leadership. Considering the empirically documented impact of mindfulness on self- and social awareness, empathy, behavioral flexibility, re-perceiving, and relationship building, as well as the theoretical rationale for mindfulness processes, we propose:

H1:   Mindfulness is positively related to the Total LPI leadership practices.

Similarly, we propose that mindfulness is related to each of the five leadership practices. Note that each of the practices entails six specific behaviors. We propose:

H2:   Mindfulness is positively related to each of the five LPI leadership practices.

We will now present a rationale for the positive relationship between mindfulness and each of the practices. *Modeling the way* involves setting an example, following through on commitments, setting achievable goals and making progress towards goals one step at a time (Kouzes & Posner, 2012a). The increased current moment awareness combined with an attitude of openness and flexibility of a mindful leader facilitate the behaviors related to the modeling the way practice. The enhanced social awareness results in the leader's awareness of what goals and values are important to their followers as well as their needs and preferences. This allows the leader to set relevant goals and determine processes to be used to achieve them.

Describing a compelling image of the future, inviting followers to share an exciting dream, showing followers how their interests can be realized through a common vision and emphasizing

the big picture of what is to be accomplished are behaviors associated with *inspiring a shared vision* (Kouzes & Posner, 2012a). Mindfulness supports these behaviors because it cultivates a present rather than a past orientation as well as curiosity and openness to novel ideas. The mindful leader clearly articulates their own goals and vision. Emotion and behavior regulation reduces the potential for negative reactions to followers' ideas about the future that might not be directly aligned with the leader's ideas.

Challenging the process is about leaders and followers taking initiative and experimenting with new ideas, looking outside the organization for inspiration. Thus, leaders create an environment where taking risks and making mistakes is not seen negatively (Kouzes & Posner, 2012a). In essence, this leadership practice is about a leader's ability to accept uncertainty and relinquishing control. Mindfulness is associated with acceptance of uncertainty and impermanence and the ability to flexibly respond to the environment. Hence, a mindful leader is willing to question the status quo and encourage the exploration of new ideas and processes.

Enabling others to act focuses on the leader's ability to create a team orientation and a collaborative environment. Kouzes and Posner (2012a) found that this is achieved by creating trust between the leader and the followers and among followers. Specifically, they found that leaders who actively listen, respect others, and support others' decisions, are effectively creating trust in a team-based environment. The mindfulness processes summarized above, facilitate the engagement in such behaviors. Paying attention and a non-judgmental focus on the presence result in active and open listening and provides the leader with the requisite understanding to guide followers in their growth and development.

The fifth and final leadership practice, *encouraging the heart*, addresses the team aspect of leadership. It involves behaviors focused on recognizing and celebrating individual and group accomplishments – expressing the value and importance of each team member. Rewarding followers creatively for their contributions requires that the leader is cognizant of the contributions and is willing to offer novel, meaningful celebrations.

Overall, then, mindfulness is likely to impact leadership because mindful leaders manage their emotions and behaviors and are therefore less likely to be self-absorbed and more likely to be conscious of the needs and interests of their followers. We expect that mindfulness is related to transformational leadership and to each of the transformational leadership practices—as described by the LPI.

Methods

Sample

Data were collected from one hundred and six MBA students at a university in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. Several assessments, including the LPI, were integrated components of a course on Mindful Leadership and were distributed to the students in class. Students completed the questionnaires at their convenience.

Variables and measures

This exploratory study includes the DV transformational leadership practices, the IV mindfulness as well as two control variables. Mindfulness was measured as a skill using the short version of the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (KIMS) (Baer et al., 2004). The KIMS consists of four components that capture the core elements of mindfulness: (1) Observation (internal and external stimuli), (2) describing, (3) acting with awareness, and (4) accepting without

judgment. The KIMS consists of 39 items that are scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never or rarely true, 5 = very often or always true). We used the KIMS-Short that includes 20 items replicating the basic four factor structure (Höfling et al., 2011).

The five leadership practices were assessed using the Leader Practices Inventory (LPI) (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; 2002; 2012a, 2012b). Specifically, we used the LPI self-assessment, consisting of thirty items – six items per practice. Each item represents a behavior related to the practice. Respondents indicate on a ten-point scale (1 = almost never, 10 = almost always) the extent to which they engage in the specific behavior. The maximum possible score for each practice is 60. A total LPI score was calculated summing the scores across the five practices. The psychometric qualities of the LPI have already been investigated and supported (Carless et al., 2000; Fields & Herold, 1997; Posner 1993; Posner, 2016). The LPI has been shown to be an acceptable measure of transformational leadership (Fields & Herold, 1997).

Some research on the antecedents to effective transformational leadership investigated the relationship between the five-factor model of personality (Big 5 personality characteristics – Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability) (Costa & McCrae, 1992a) and transformational leadership. Extraversion, openness to experience, and agreeableness have positively predicted transformational leadership (Judge & Bono, 2000). Therefore, we included the Big 5 as a control in our study. The Big 5 were assessed using the NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1992a, b; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993; John, 1990). Gender was the only demographic variable included and coded as 1 = female, 2 = male.
Statistical Methods

Descriptive statistics for the variables were used for an initial assessment of the data. Relationships among the study variables and between the IVs and DV were explored using bivariate correlations and regression analyses.

Results

Table I presents the means and standard deviations for the study variables.
Table 1: Variable Means and Standard Deviations

	N	Mean	SD
Mindfulness			
Observe	106	21.46	4.63
Describe	106	16.65	3.77
AWA (Acting with awareness)	106	11.02	3.00
AWJ (Accepting without judgment)	106	8.43	3.27
Total KIMS	106	57.57	8.45
Transformational Leadership Practices			
Challenge the process	106	46.03	6.5
Inspire a shared vision	106	43.72	6.3
Enable others to act	106	48.88	5.26
Model the way	106	47.21	5.44
Encourage the heart	106	45.72	7.10

LPI total	106	231.55	23.43
Big 5 Personality Characteristics			
Openness	106	51.64	12.59
Conscientiousness	106	66.42	13.42
Extroversion	106	54.73	15.88
Agreeableness	106	57.19	14.41
Emotional Stability	106	53.02	16.12

Source: Our own analysis based on our own survey data.

The means and standard deviations for the study variables are in the range of expectations for this group. Noteworthy is that the sample (N = 106) consists of more women than men with sixty-six women and forty men in the sample.

The bivariate correlations are summarized in Table II.

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations (N=106)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Observe													
2	Describe	.17												
3	Awareness	-.10	.26**											
4	Non-Judgmental	-.31	.35***	.37***										
5	Total KIMS	.47**	.77***	.56***	.51***									
6	Challenging TP[1]	0.22*	.31**	.08	.03	.29**								
7	Inspiring SV	.16	.18	14	.10	.26**	.58***							
8	Enabling OT	.22*	.22*	.-06	.02	.20*	.48***	.42***						
9	Modeling TW	.11	.22*	-.02	-.01	.15	.33***	.49***	.45***					
10	Encouraging TH	.12	.18	-.06	.06	.15	.34***	.55***	.56***	.57***				
11	Total_LPI	.22*	.29**	.02	.06	.28**	.72***	.81***	.74***	.73***	.81***			
12	Openness	.08	.08	.18	.11	.20*	.12	.05	.02	.6	.05	.08		
13	Conscientiousness	-0.15	-.02	.02	-.07	-.09	-.07	0	-.08	.14	.03	.01	.07	

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

Source: Own correlational analysis based on our own survey data

The correlation between Total KIMS (mindfulness) and Total LPI (transformational leadership practices) is positive and significant (r = .28, p < .01), providing some preliminary support for H1. The correlations between the Total KIMS and Challenge the Process and Inspire a Shared Vision are positive and significant with r = .29, p < .01 and r = .26, p < .01, respectively, providing some preliminary partial support for H2. Several of the Big 5 personality characteristics are significantly related to transformational leadership. Emotional Stability and Agreeableness are positively and significantly correlated with the Total LPI, r = .26, p < .01 and r = .23, p < .05, respectively. The correlation between Extroversion and Challenge the Process is positive and significant (r = .21, p < .05). Agreeableness is positively and significantly related to three of the transformational

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[1] Challenging TP = Challenging the Process; Inspiring SV = Inspiring a shared vision; Enabling Others = Enabling others to act; ModelingTW = Modeling the way; Encouraging TH = Encouraging the heart.

leadership practices, Inspire a Shared Vision (r = .19, r < 05), Enable others to Act (r = .25, p < .05), and Encourage the Heart (r = .31, p < .01).

A stepwise regression analysis of the Total KIMS, the Big 5, and Gender on Total LPI produced three significant models presented in Table III.

Table 3: Stepwise Regression on Total LPI

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	189.30	177.87	163.91
Total KIMS	.725**	.650*	.538*
Emotional Stability		.298*	.311*
Agreeableness			.345*
R^2	0.067	0.107	0.149
Adjusted R^2	0.058	0.090	0.124
F-Value	7.473**	6.172**	5.952**

*p < .05; **p < .01

Source: Own regression analysis based on our own survey data

The Total KIMS was the first variable entered, resulting in Model 1. Emotional Stability was added In Model 2, and Agreeableness was added in Model 3. These results provide further support for H1.

Further stepwise regression analyses of the Total KIMS, the Big 5, and Gender on each of the LPI practices produced significant models only for Challenging the Process and Inspiring a Shared Vision. The stepwise regression for Challenging the Process resulted in one model (F(1,104) = 8.76) with Total KIMS as the predictor (p = .004). The stepwise regression for Inspiring a Shared Vision resulted in one model (F(1,104) = 6.51) with Total KIMS as the predictor, p = .012. None of the other leadership practices were significantly predicted by Total KIMS. These results provide partial support for H2.

Discussion

Leadership development is essential to management effectiveness. Many leadership development programs exist and have been used with varying degrees of success. We suggested that the success of a program may depend on the program participants' level of mindfulness. Specifically, this study explored whether mindfulness is related to more frequent engagement in the transformational leadership practices as identified in the LPI.

Overall, the results of this exploratory study provide some support for the relationship between mindfulness and engagement in transformational leadership practices. Respondents with higher levels of mindfulness indicated a more extensive use of transformational leadership practices captured by the LPI. Transformational leaders are aware and considerate of their followers and the followers' needs and preferences and are able to inspire them to work hard towards a common goal. Mindfulness enhances self- and social awareness and self-regulation of emotion and behavior. Considering the processes and impact of mindfulness, leaders who are mindful seem to be inclined to engage in transformational leadership behaviors.

Of the five transformational leadership practices, the results for Challenging the Process and Inspiring a Shared Vision showed a consistent relationship with mindfulness. Behaviors related to

Challenging the Process focus on stimulating followers intellectually and creating an environment that values creativity, encourages followers to take risks, and develop new ideas and approaches. Self- and social awareness, both cultivated through mindfulness, are important facilitators for the Challenging the Process leadership behaviors. Inspiring a Shared Vision involves behaviors such as "I show others how their interests can be realized," and "I appeal to others to share a dream of the future." Again, self- and social awareness facilitate these behaviors and it makes sense that this particular leadership practice is more likely to be executed by individuals with higher levels of mindfulness. Noteworthy is that prior research based on the LPI, consistently identified these two practices as the least commonly used ones (Abuh-Tineh et al*.,* 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Posner, 2016). Therefore, integrating a mindfulness component into LPI based programs holds unique promise to specifically support the development of these two less commonly used practices.

Modeling the Way, Enabling Others to Act, and Encouraging the Heart were not related to mindfulness while several of the Big 5 personality characteristics were. Respondents who scored high on Agreeableness were more likely to engage in the behaviors related to Enable Others to Act. This result makes sense since individuals who are highly agreeable are less egocentric and more social oriented and quick to hear out opinions of the people around them. Encouraging the Heart was significantly related Agreeableness and Emotional Stability. Individuals who are emotionally stable find it easy to stay calm and are less affected by stressful events. Note that Emotional Stability is significantly and positively correlated with the mindfulness component, Accepting without judgment. This implies that individuals who are emotionally stable, self-regulate emotions and tend to be able to observe their environment with neutrality and respond with consistent, self-regulated behaviors. These qualities facilitate interacting with followers with awareness and kindness, i.e., Encouraging the Heart.

Several limitations have to be kept in mind when interpreting the results of this study. A larger sample would be desirable. The sample consisted of MBA students and therefore the results have limited generalizability. Some of the results may be due to the specific measures used, the LPI and KIMS. Including additional control variables may be useful.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study results have relevant theoretical and practical implications. Including mindfulness in future leadership and transformational leadership research seems appropriate. Empirical studies on the relationship of mindfulness and transformational leadership may utilize experimental designs to discover causal relationships. Of particular importance will be studies that focus on exploring the relationships between transformational leadership and the specific mindfulness processes. Controlled experiments including pre- and post-assessments for mindfulness and the LPI would allow for robust conclusions regarding the beneficial role of incorporating mindfulness training into leadership development. Further, employing other measures for the study variables such as the MFLQ (**Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1997**) for transformational leadership and the MAAS (Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale; Brown & Ryan, 2003) may provide further insights. Future management and leadership development research may consider the use of the LPI as well as the application of mindfulness in different contexts of leadership training.

Finally, the results of this study have important practical implications. Mindfulness is related to transformational leadership practices and facilitates the behaviors associated with challenging the process and inspiring a shared vision. Offering a mindfulness program in conjunction with leadership training based on the LPI appears to have merit.

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