

# MINDFULNESS:

## CATALYST FOR RESILIENCE AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE FOR TODAY'S LEADERS

**T**hrough my research and facilitation work with thousands of executives, I discovered that effective leaders are distinct in at least two specific ways: They are better at managing themselves, and they are more tolerant of ambiguity when leading others. Both of these skills are related to emotional intelligence and resilience.

In other words, effective leaders remain calm when the going gets tough, and they are not afraid of saying "I don't know" when the situation is uncertain or unclear. They don't rush to the first conclusion available, and by remaining open to facing both facts and emotions in the room, they have the capacity to genuinely find out what the best way forward actually is for the situation at hand. This is how effective leaders stand out, make better decisions, and produce high quality results.

I then discovered that the underlying attitudes, or qualities, of resilient and emotional intelligent leaders seem to look and feel like mindfulness.

### What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is about actively paying attention to what is happening, right here and right now, with the intention to keep an open mind, see the situation from a different perspective, and to respond with integrity rather than jumping to conclusions. It enables us to face challenging situations with the psychological flexibility that we need to do well and succeed in today's ever more dynamic and complex world.



In fact, mindfulness really comes into its own during high-stress, unpredictable situations.

What makes this particularly relevant for managers striving for sustainable career success is that it is a trainable skill, rather a personality trait that only few people possess.

So effectively, mindfulness is a way of developing these critical leadership skills of emotional intelligence and resilience in the face of complexity and uncertainty – and as we are finding here at Cranfield, it seems to be an innovative and effective way of developing these increasingly important skills for today's leaders.

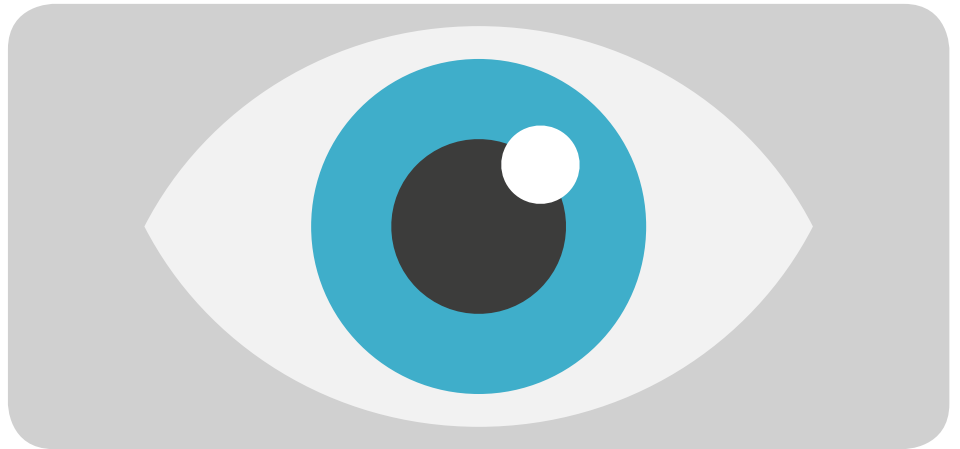
The evidence base for the effectiveness of mindfulness training has been growing for the last 20-30 years, and a landmark

longitudinal study recently published in *The Lancet* concluded that mindfulness practice is as effective as medication to fight mental illness. I have introduced several thousand executives and students to mindfulness, and my research suggests that mindfulness training may help busy executive students concentrate more and keep their attention on where they need it most.

By the way, is your attention right now here, with me, or somewhere else?

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This ability to remain calm in the face of the storm – “cool as a cucumber”, dealing with the situation in a level-headed, resilient, and emotionally intelligent way, is a key skill for today’s leaders.



If it is, you’re human – and we’re finding increasingly that focusing our attention on the task at hand is hard, and performance suffers when we don’t.

The good news is mindfulness training is a science-based set of techniques that are valid and reliable in helping anyone in society change their relationship with difficult, stressful situations.

### Why would mindfulness promote more reliable organisational performance?

Because stress and impulsiveness are strongly linked. Impulsiveness, in turn, dampens people’s ability to act in a prosocial manner. Mindfulness helps people regulate their emotions more effectively and become less impulsive, leading to emotional equanimity and prosocial behaviour.

Leading scholars such as Tim Vogus and his colleagues argue that these qualities are probably the key foundations of mindful organisations: when their employees and leaders have an even keel as well as an other-orientation at work. Leaders have a special responsibility here; since leadership is a shared practice, mindfulness needs to become a shared mindset too, and it must be practiced at several levels to be effective: individually, in the space between people, and collectively.

The bad news? Mindfulness training is essentially mental training, and so very similar to physical exercise training. What’s the bad news about exercise?

Although we know how good it is for us, most of us talk about it, rather than actually doing it and prioritising it over other important things.

Let me conclude by suggesting what you can do: Get involved in the current mindfulness buzz (there is a buzz because there is a scientific base for it, and there seems increasing hunger for it from people crumbling under pressure at work), find out more, start cultivating your own mindfulness practice. As a side effect, it is extremely likely that you’ll find you become less stressed yourself, and – if you believe any of the evidence I’ve talked about – you will be able to function more sustainably in your own job.

**Jutta Tobias**

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