

THE Mindful™ LEADER

BY MICHAEL BUNTING

INTRODUCTION

Leaders need far more than skills training and techniques to lead from their greatest potential. They need a process that supports them to become consistently self-aware, self-regulating, values-based, innovative, openhearted and balanced within.

Mindfulness, an ancient tradition that is now being proven by science, provides this process. In its simplest form, mindfulness means to maintain a non-judgmental awareness of our attitudes, thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and environment in the present moment.

WHEN LEADERS ARE AT THEIR BEST

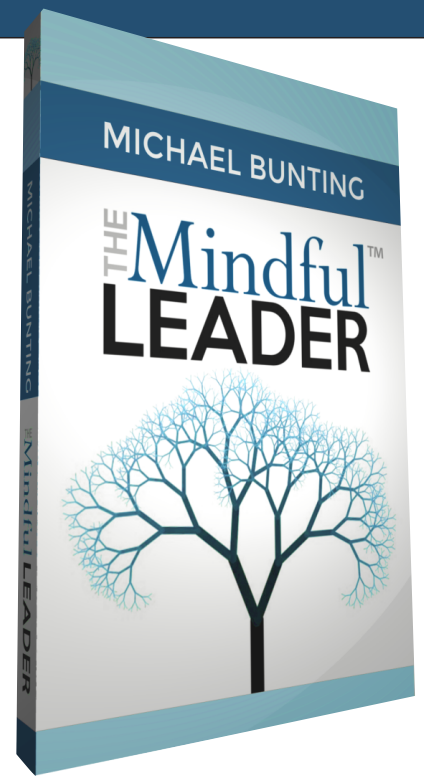
When asked, “What state are you in when you are at your best as a leader?” the responses from leaders are universal: Physically, they are relaxed, as opposed to tense. Mentally, they are clear and focused, as opposed to being plagued by racing, frantic thoughts of regret, doubt, and worry. Emotionally, they are openhearted and courageous, as opposed to closed, hardened, or fearful. In terms of neuroscience, in this state our brain is at its best too—we are operating from the prefrontal cortex, the seat of conscious decision-making, planning, and judgment rather than the amygdala, the source of fear-based fight, flight, or freeze reactions.

This grounded, peaceful state is the promise of mindfulness and the reason why it matters so much for leadership.

THE RESEARCH ON MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness has been shown to literally change the structure and function of the brain and provide the following benefits:

- Stress and anxiety reduction.
- Improved cognitive skills, including improved executive functioning, sustained attention, visuo-spatial processing, working memory, our ability to focus attention and suppress distracting information, and increasing our information processing speed.
- Enhanced creativity. Mindfulness practice can reduce “cognitive rigidity,” thus enabling us to respond with greater flexibility to situations where we might otherwise be blinded by past experience.
- Stronger relationships, including reducing social anxiety, improving our ability to communicate our feelings, increasing empathy, and decreasing emotional reactivity.
- Increased compassion.
- Spiritual benefits, such as enhancing self-insight, morality, intuition, and fear modulation.
- Health benefits, including depression prevention, increased immune functioning, pain control, improved sleep patterns, greater ability to curb and overcome addictions and binge eating, and improved heart health.



TWO FOUNDATION DISCIPLINES OF MINDFUL LEADERS

1. **Be Here Now:** Mindful leaders learn to train their minds to stay in the present moment, thus increasing their inner peace and equanimity and enabling them to make wiser decisions, treat people better, and proactively manage their behavior. We can cultivate mindfulness both formally (meditation practice) and informally (being present in our daily activities).
2. **Take 200 Percent Accountability:** The worst thing leaders can do is blame other people and/or circumstances when things go wrong. Mindful leaders take accountability, but without taking on the burdens of others. They hold themselves 100 percent accountable for their actions and responses, while holding their team members 100 percent accountable for theirs. This equation, 200 percent accountability, is how leaders eliminate dysfunction in teams.

RESOURCES

Michael's new book will be released in May next year with global publishing company, Wiley. Please connect with Michael on linkedin if you wish to receive a special introductory offer on the book when it is released. The book will include an access code to a wonderful set of online mindful leadership resources.

Other useful reading & resources:

- *Mindfulness for Beginners* – Jon Kabat-Zinn
- *Full Catastrophe Living* – Jon Kabat-Zinn
- *The Miracle of Mindfulness* – Thich Nhat Hanh
- www.smilingmind.com.au (an app for your phone)
- www.headspace.com (an app for your phone)
- *Wise Heart* – Jack Kornfield

ABOUT MICHAEL BUNTING

Michael Bunting is the founder and CEO of the leadership consultancy, WorkSmart Australia. He co-authored *Extraordinary Leadership in Australia & New Zealand* with Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, the world's premier researchers and authors in the field of leadership. Michael teaches Mindful Leadership on Sydney University's multi award-winning Global Executive MBA and has been teaching and practicing mindfulness for over 2 decades.