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The Mindful Leader: research evidence for the effectiveness of mindfulness training among leaders in creating psychologically safe workplaces.

A commentary on the literature

Martin Shain S.J.D.

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Introduction

This commentary is intended primarily to support the leader's course: "A Meeting of Minds: knowledge and skills for compassionate leaders in psychologically safe workplaces".

Numbered references are to the attached "Select Bibliography on Mindfulness at Work".

The focus of the commentary is on research that pertains to the effectiveness of mindfulness training and mindfulness capacity in the furtherance of psychological safety in the workplace which is defined as follows in Canada's National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety CSA Z1003¹:

"The vision for a psychologically healthy and safe workplace is one that actively works to prevent harm to worker psychological health, including in negligent, reckless, or intentional ways, and promotes psychological well-being.

Psychological health and safety is embedded in the way people interact with one another on a daily basis and is part of the way working conditions and management practices are structured and the way decisions are made and communicated.

While there are many factors external to the workplace that can impact psychological health and safety, this Standard addresses those psychological health and safety aspects within the control, responsibility, or influence of the workplace that can have an impact within, or on, the workforce."

While there is a wealth of research and commentary on the personal and interpersonal gains associated with mindfulness training² there is still relatively little that directly addresses the potential connection between such training and the creation and sustainability of psychologically safe workplaces³. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that part of this connection would be through the incorporation of mindfulness skills into the repertoire of leaders⁴.

At a minimum it seems also reasonable to hypothesize that the reported personal and interpersonal benefits of mindfulness training in its various forms would at least be consistent with psychological safety and ideally these benefits would contribute to its development and maintenance⁵.

By deduction the personal and interpersonal gains that have been documented should in some instances translate into such outcomes but deduction is not the most powerful and persuasive method for their ascertainment. What is needed is empirical validation of this connection. Studies of this nature have been in short supply until fairly recently⁶.

¹ 27,40,42. Note that in the USA psychological safety has a more limited meaning, being mostly related to the importance of employee voice. See:10,31The Canadian Standard incorporates this and goes beyond it.

² See 18 for a research overview until 2017 and 1,2,4,8,12,13,19,23,2528,29,30,36,37,43,44,45,49,50

³ 3,21

⁴ 6,8,9,11,14,20,48,49,50,52

⁵ 3, 15,21,33,34

⁶ 16,17,18

Earlier studies were bedevilled by methodological shortcomings that render their conclusions little more than suggestive⁷. This reservation can also be seen in the context of concerns about the possible limitations of mindfulness training in the workplace particularly as it impacts upon organizational change⁸.

The cost context

The costs associated with lack of psychological safety in the Canadian workplace are difficult to estimate with any precision. However, the following rough calculation may be of some value to leaders based on correlating several sources of data.

1. US estimates of costs to employers associated with job stress are in excess of \$300 billion per annum⁹
2. Simply taking a percentage of this based on Canada's population being one tenth of the USA's it might be argued that we are in the \$30 billion range. Earlier estimates from Canada cite a figure that in today's dollars would be closer to \$20 billion¹⁰.
3. Of this amount we need to estimate the fraction that could be attributed to what is now increasingly referred to as mental injury – that is, negligent, reckless and intentional harm to mental health that could be prevented in a psychologically safe workplace. Such estimates are of course approximations but range between 25% and 33% of all mental injury claims in Canada¹¹.
4. That would mean between \$5 billion and \$7.5 billion at the low end of the estimates and \$7.5 and 9.9 billion at the upper end could be saved by methods designed to reduce superfluous stress – that is stress resulting from forms of management that induce or contribute to it.
5. Conversely the cost of doing nothing for employers is to see rapidly escalating losses associated with absenteeism, presenteeism, long and short term disability, low morale, productivity, workplace conflict and organizational agility and ability to respond to changes in the economic and social environment¹².

A call for action to leaders to address employee mental health

Employers – or at least 60% of their senior HR managers- reportedly see improving leader and manager effectiveness as the top priority for 2023, calling upon them to be more authentic, empathetic and adaptive. Mindfulness is thought to be a likely means to achieve these gains¹³.

⁷ 18

⁸ 5,15,16,17,18,22,47

⁹ 7

¹⁰ 40 pp 11-14

¹¹ See note 10

¹² 7

¹³ 11,

69% of employees across the globe reportedly believe that managers have more influence on their mental health than even their spouse or partner¹⁴.

There is no lack of advice on how improvements in leaders' compassion and empathy could be achieved¹⁵.

Key pointers for leaders from the research literature

Based on the research referred to so far there is little dispute concerning the potential effectiveness of mindfulness inducing practices in reducing negative emotions associated with stress, anxiety and depression in non clinical populations. These gains are even observed in certain clinical settings¹⁶.

Certain mindfulness inducing practices have been shown to increase concentration, sensory clarity and equanimity.

However, mindfulness inductions appear to work better for some people than others.

In an effort to explore why such differential effects are observed, recent research has shown that it is important to distinguish different forms of mindfulness/meditation training. Earlier research had a tendency to conflate different forms of mindfulness training or to not specify them at all¹⁷.

A principal distinction appears to be between breathing focussed methods and loving kindness methods. The preponderance of research has been on breathing based techniques¹⁸.

When seen in the context of mindfulness training in the workplace this distinction becomes of vital importance.

The impact of breathing focussed training in the workplace is consistent with previous research that generally shows greater reductions in negative emotions but appears to be counterproductive in stimulating pro-social reparation behaviour and feelings of responsibility directed toward fellow workers. Loving kindness meditation training however does appear to stimulate such behaviour, at least in the short run¹⁹.

Since loving kindness is associated with compassionate behaviour this finding is of crucial importance for the creation and maintenance of psychologically safe working environments.

Compassion among leaders at all levels has been consistently shown to contribute to what we now refer to as psychological safety and it appears that this capacity can be induced through certain forms of mindfulness

¹⁴ 6,9,51

¹⁵ 1,6,7,15,20,34,35,49,50,52

¹⁶ 4

¹⁷ 16,17,18

¹⁸ 18

¹⁹ Note 18 above

training. Again, however, because of the confounding effect of not distinguishing different forms of training it is not clear at this point what forms of such training work best²⁰.

Research over decades has shown that in order for workplace based health promotion programs to reach their maximum effectiveness it is necessary for them to be delivered in a psychosocially supportive environment that in this era we would describe as psychologically safe²¹.

The lack of such supportive environments may account for the decay of such capacities once acquired and even for the negative results of some individually directed stress management interventions.

Best Advice for Leaders

1. Combine major forms of mindfulness training

The best advice for leaders at this point in the evolving research landscape would appear to be to choose mindfulness training that combines breathing based and loving kindness based methods.

From what we can see so far through the research lens, this type of combination can be expected to yield benefits for leaders personally, for employees generally and for organizational performance.

One article has suggested that it may be beneficial for leaders to engage in *both* forms of training because breathing based meditation can boost the personal resilience required to deal with the potential stress of demonstrating loving kindness and compassion²². One has only to consider the burgeoning literature on compassion fatigue¹ to appreciate why this may be a good idea since the emotional energy required to exercise compassion may be considerable depending on the basic skills and aptitudes of individual leaders.

The accumulating evidence on the value of self compassion in building resilience supports the argument that it should also be part of the skill sets taught within a comprehensive policy for the advancement of psychological safety²³.

2. Locate training within an organizational framework aimed at creating psychological safety

There is one major proviso to all the above, however. Research over many decades has shown that the effectiveness of workplace health promotion interventions of many kinds can be either enhanced or reduced depending on the quality of the psychosocial environments in which they are delivered. This has been shown to be particularly the case with stress reduction programs (SRPs). In fact these days it is rare to see an article that advocates for individually focussed SRPs in the absence of a more comprehensive organizational framework that emphasizes systemic stress management at source²⁴.

²⁰ 1,3,12,13,14,20,29,30,48,49,50

²¹ 24,26,32,38,41

²² 17

²³ 2

²⁴ See note 21 above

This research suggests strongly that whatever the nature and quality of mindfulness training interventions may be, their effectiveness is likely to be enhanced by incorporating them into comprehensive, policy-driven strategic initiatives that focus on the enrichment of the psychosocial environment and culture of the workplace.

In other words, psychological safety should be the number one priority followed by programmatic initiatives that support it.

3. Focus on a Culture of Fairness

Recent research has suggested that any such strategic interventions should be sure to focus on the goal of enhancing fairness on the part of leaders at all levels²⁵.

In a paper that ultimately contributed to the development of the National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety referred to above, fairness was defined as “the *perception* that one’s interests, claims or rights are recognized, acknowledged and given reasonable weight by significant others to whom one is affiliated by ties of kinship, friendship, collegiality or contract in situations where the interests, claims or rights of those others have to be reconciled”.

Fairness is also a bundle of *emotions* that include but may not be limited to comfort, security, trust, mental well-being and “coherence” (all is right with the world) that follow rapidly on the heels of these perceptions²⁶.

A sense of fairness may be experienced as feelings of:

- *comfort* associated with belonging to a group or community with shared values, beliefs, understanding and standards of conduct;
- *well-being* associated with the warmth of other people’s respect, regard and trust;
- *calmness* associated with knowing that others are not trying to gain unearned advantage over you;
- *coherence and order* associated with the workings of a higher form of justice in human affairs.

Correspondingly, a sense of *unfairness* may be experienced as feelings of:

- *anxiety* associated with the perception that one’s values, beliefs, understandings and standards of conduct are not shared;
- *depression* arising from the perception that one is not seen as being worthy of just treatment;
- *anger* at being tricked, left out, ignored and not being taken seriously by others;
- *alienation and disorder* associated with the perception that no higher form of justice prevails in human affairs.

Taken together, the perceptual and emotional elements of fairness blend theories of procedural justice with the Sociology of Emotions through processes that are described as the *Socio-biological Translation*.

²⁵ See research summarized in 42.

²⁶ 39

Socio-biological Translation is “a mechanism by which human beings receive messages about the social environment and convert the messages to biological signals that trigger the processes of disease development”²⁷.

The Socio-biological Translation has two phases that are hard to separate because of the complexity of brain-body feedback loops.

The first phase involves the *translation of perceptions into emotions*; the second phase involves the *translation of emotions into neuroimmunological processes* that ultimately influence physical and mental health status.

Given these mind body connections it is not hard to see how the mindfulness practices of loving kindness and self compassion could be expected to support the development of fairness within a workplace culture.

In Canada the most promising candidates for the development of organizational initiatives to support fairness and a psychologically safe environment generally are The National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety and Quebec’s Healthy Enterprise Strategy.

4. *Focus not only on management systems but also on supportive cultures*

Even then, however, these initiatives, focussed as they are on developing *management systems* that foster psychological safety, may fall short when it comes to the creation of supportive workplace *cultures*.

This is why the leaders’ course, for support of which this commentary was developed, emphasizes not only the acquisition of mindfulness skills but also the pursuit of psychologically safe *cultures* designed to support these skills.

The leader’s course introduces leaders not only to the skills of mindfulness but also to the concept and practice of the “neighbour at work” philosophy.

One of the primary goals of this practice is to foster a culture of fairness within the framework of a new social contract within the workplace.

Early evaluations of this practice in several workplaces show that even though it did not influence the experience of job effort and demands, control over work and psychological reward it did significantly influence perceptions of fairness in many participants in comparison to a group that was not exposed to the intervention²⁸.

²⁷ 46. See also 13,14,19,30

²⁸ 40,chapter 4

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ⁱ See for example Harvard Business Review March 30th 2022: Dina Denham Smith: “Compassion fatigue is real and it may be weighing you down”. Leaders today are expected to take on a lot of “emotional labour” that can take a serious toll on their health. Self compassion can help alleviate the exhaustion that can result from the expenditure of excessive amounts of mental energy