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Integration of the practice of mindfulness within action learning as an added component within a post graduate leadership programme: an account of practice

Abstract

This account of practice provides a practical example of the use of mindfulness practice within action learning which was a component of a bespoke UK Business School post-graduate leadership development programme commissioned by an English NHS Mental Health Trust aimed at improving the leadership capacity of mid-level managers through work-based learning. The article discusses background and context of the programme followed by how application of mindfulness exercises was integrated within the action learning process to encourage participants to be ‘in the moment’ as an added component of their leadership development. The aim of the paper is to share examples of practice applied within action learning. Finally, the paper asserts that the application of mindfulness exercises helped to enhance the action learning process by creating a calm, focused space for individual and collective reflections, enhancing the quality of engagement and enabling action learning members to take a more pragmatic approach to addressing the work issues raised within the action learning sets.

Key words: action learning, mindfulness, mindful practice, leadership development, management development

Background

A bespoke one-year leadership development programme was designed and validated by a UK Business School in partnership with a local NHS Mental Health Trust (MHT), aimed to meet the strategic and leadership development objectives of the Trust and, at the same time, to facilitate academic qualifications through learning in the work place. The programme was first launched in February 2014 with 16 participants (Cohort 1). The second group (Cohort 2) of 15 participants commenced in January 2015 and the third group (Cohort 3) of 15 participants in January 2016. The participants were sponsored by the MHT and their application to enrol on the programme was supported by their line managers. They were mainly in management roles,

either with direct line management responsibilities or with supervision and project involvement requiring people management capabilities, working at a range of different operational levels, including clinical and non-clinical services. The programme consisted of six dedicated 'study-days' incorporating content on managing and leading people and teams and a series of four facilitated action learning sessions. The programme was delivered by a team of four academic/practitioner professionals. The assessment comprised of a reflective review of professional learning and a critical reflection of their personal leadership journey in the implementation of a 'stretch-project' within their workplace. The annual programme evaluation strategy involved pre and post questionnaires, a focus group and semi structured interviews at the end of the programme to collate participant feedback which was used for on-going improvement of the programme.

As the lead co-ordinator of the programme as well as one of the action learning facilitators, I worked closely with the sponsors of the programme, designing, delivering and co-facilitating the study days and supporting one of the action learning set. I also planned and implemented the evaluation strategy for cohort 1 and 2 of the programme. The overall evaluation findings was very positive, specifically indicating action learning as an effective method of leadership and management development as highlighted in the literature (Boshyk, 2002; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Raelin 2008; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Leonard and Lang, 2010).

However, during the programme delivery of cohort 1 and 2, it became apparent to me (which I discussed with the co-deliverers/ facilitators) that most of the managers were working in constantly challenging work environment and appeared to be under high levels of stress at work. Having gained insight into their work, I proposed the integration of the concept of 'mindfulness' to help the managerial leaders to build resilience and self-care as a part of their leadership development for the cohort 3 participants. I had come across mindfulness during this time and had started to use headspace, an online application (www.headspace.com) which offers short (3-5 minutes) mindfulness exercises. Also, I had read some recent studies on mindfulness introduced into leadership/management development. One was a case study of a tailored mindfulness course introduced in an asset management firm to sharpen focus and improve composure of staff to cope with the changes and challenges in their work place (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2016); the other was a Mindful Leader programme using mindfulness training and practices to enhance capabilities of collaboration and fostering resilience along with other elements of leadership development at the Ashridge

Business School (Olivier *et al* 2016). In consultation with my co-facilitators, I developed a series of exercises and learning activities on mindlessness which could be integrated into the existing programme. We received full co-operation from the Mental Health Trust in this implementation as there was recognition and support of mindfulness practice within the organisation.

Mindfulness as a method of leadership development

Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. This creates a state of alertness in which the one does not get caught in thoughts or sensations but accepts them, allowing them to come and go at ease. Mindfulness is defined as a state of 'heightened meta-awareness decreased discursive cognition' (Kudesia & Tashi Nyima, 2015:2). Systematic research reports positive impacts on brain activity, producing increased control over chronic pain, anxiety and depression (Kerr *et al*, 2013), curtailing negative functioning and enhancing positive outcomes in mental health, physical health, behavioural regulation and interpersonal relationships (Brown *et al*, 2007).

Studies highlight that the restful alertness achieved through mindfulness can lead to improved performance (Alexander, Cranson, Boyer & Orme-Johnson, 1987; Arguelles, McCraty & Rees, 2003). In the workplace, this restful alertness through meditative mindfulness has been found to improve employee health, wellbeing, job satisfaction, efficiency and productivity, which in turn, appears to influence organisational climate, absenteeism and financial performance (Schmidt-Wilk, alexander & Swanson, 1996). Dumas (2007) suggests that cultivating mindfulness in future business leaders invites an inner opening of awareness which, in turn, enables a corresponding opening towards the world before them. He offers simple approaches to fostering mindfulness which can be used in the classroom such as breathing and meditation, deep listening, progressive relaxation, guided imagery, automatic writing and drawing to expand awareness and push beyond the habitual ways of knowing. The practice of being fully present in the moment can help one to observe, reflect and see things more deeply and from multi-perspectives.

Mindfulness made the cover of Time Magazine in February 2014 titled 'The Mindful Revolution: The science of finding focus in a stressed-out, multitasking culture'. George (2014) points out that this could be the latest business fad or signalling a major change in thinking of

executive leaders; he believes it is the latter. Google, General Mills, Goldman Sachs, Apple, Medtronic and Aetna have fully bought into the practice of mindfulness as they believe that this can help leaders to gain focus and clarity in decision making, develop creativity in transforming their enterprises, cultivate compassion for customers and employers and have the courage to 'go their way'.

It is this aspect of mindfulness that the leadership programme aimed to promote to the managers on Cohort 3 of programme. It was anticipated that the practice of being fully present in the moment through selected mindfulness exercises would help the participants to observe, reflect and see things more deeply and from multi-perspectives; to be able to learn to know oneself and others so that they could build resilience and self-care.

Approach to integrating mindfulness within an existing post graduate leadership programme

A series of learning interventions and activities introducing the concept of mindfulness were designed and dovetailed within the content of the programme delivered between January and December 2016. The practice of mindfulness involved a series of 'mindful' learning interventions intended to enable the participants to learn self-care and build resilience within the 'study days' and mindfulness exercises at the start of the action learning sessions.

The concept and practice of mindfulness was threaded into study days by planned learning activities. In the first study day, the 'healthy mind platter' (Rock & Siegel, 2012) and its daily essential mental activities (focus time, play time, connecting time, physical time, time in, down time and sleep time) to optimize brain matter and create well-being was used as an introductory discussion for participants to consider what should be the healthy balance and in reality what is the balance. The managers engaged in group discussion to talk about their current 'healthy mind balance' and what they will do about it. Wide ranging actions were considered in each group; from exercises, walking, yoga and taking holidays to self-awareness, reflection, 'switching off' and mindfulness meditation. As a part of the study day on managing and leading change, along with Kubler Ross (1969) and Bridges' (2010) change models, Scharmer's U theory (2009) was also presented and discussed. Here, the U theory was offered as a framework which could be applied to release stress, confusion and rigid thinking and be more tuned in to what is essential and what is possible. The 'seven meditative space for

leadership' enabled participants to consider calmness, stillness and quietness as a way of looking for real answers to questions. Participants were asked to consider/reflect on the link between the practice of leadership and the practice of mindfulness using this theory. As a part of a session on service development, participants had to contemplate how they could be 'mindful' in implementing service improvements; the opportunities and benefits as well as the obstacles and risks to be considered. In managing performance of others, they were required to evaluate health and wellbeing verses performance balance and how to manage the welfare of all parties, including their own in a performance conversation mindfully with a specific activity on demonstrating compassion. Other mindfulness activities included mindful listening and how to respond to negative emotions using mindfulness, carrot and stick verses alignment of values and acceptance verses avoidance as mindful approach in leading and managing teams.

Finally, the art of focusing as a technique was applied for cultivating self-awareness by creating a silent and relaxed space as part of leadership practice within the action learning sessions. The 15 participants on the programme were divided into 3 action learning sets, with an academic practitioner as a facilitator for each group. In an attempt to create a degree of consistency in terms of the structure of these sessions and the experience for set members, the action learning facilitators meet prior to each action learning session to agree protocols, structure and a set of open questions for the participants. Overall, each action learning sessions are divided into 3 sections: welcome & checking-in, air space for each member and checking-out. The practice of mindfulness was woven into the 'checking-in' section with a 'checking-in' process with five to seven minutes mindfulness exercises on '*becoming aware of yourself*'.

Practice of mindfulness in action learning

As mindfulness has gained recognition in western business and health sector as a virtual cure for personal anxiety, stress and related illness, a wide range of mindfulness literature, exercises, techniques and activities has become easily available. With my limited experience of mindfulness, although being brought up within the Hindu family, I was introduced to yoga and meditation at an early age, I used the mindfulness resources on the headspace website to put together the mindfulness exercises to be used in the action learning sessions. I chose simple and short guided mindfulness exercises to be offered as verbal instruction to create a space for quiet meditation. I share these with my co-facilitators and although we were very aware that we were not trained practitioners or teachers in mindfulness, we agreed to apply it within our

action learning process and get feedback from the participants. The participants had been introduced to the concept of mindfulness at the programme induction and were fully briefed of how it had been integrated within the programme. Here are some examples of the mindfulness exercises used into the action learning process:

Example 1

Step 1: Apply practice of mindfulness

Exercise: Five-minute meditation to ‘*becoming aware of yourself*’

Deliberately adopt an erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Then, bring your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledge it, asking: what is my experience right now?

- What *thoughts* are going through your mind? Acknowledge the thoughts as mental events.
- What *feelings* are here? Is there any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging them without trying to make them different from how you find them.
- What *body sensations* are here right now? Quickly scan the body to pick up any sensations of tightness or bracing, acknowledging the sensations, but, once again, not trying to change them in any way.

You may want to focus on your breathing. Start by breathing in and out slowly. One cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body. Let go of your thoughts for a minute. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending work that need your attention. Simply let yourself be still.

Step 2: Each member is then encouraged to:

First, to briefly share their experience of the mindfulness practice.

What did you notice? What did the process make you think? Is there anything you would like to share?

Second, to ‘check-in’ i.e. share their present thoughts and feelings to help them to feel connected to the group/set.

What are you bringing to the room today? Your thoughts/feelings you may want to share with the group?

Example 2

Step 1: Apply practice of mindfulness

Exercise: Guided Imagery

Take some deep breaths, close your eyes. Imagine yourself in a beautiful scene in nature. Feel the air, smell the scents around you, the warmth of the air on your skin, notice the colour of the sky. Be still and enjoy this wonderful environment. Notice a well-worn path leading into the distance toward some woods. Follow the path. Notice the texture of the ground underfoot, the sounds near and far, the light, the vegetation, the wildlife, and the smells as you move farther and farther along the path. You cross over a stream, pausing to listen and feel the water, and then continue along the path. Soon the path emerges out of the woods and opens into a colourful meadow filled with wildflowers. Walk back into the bright light and notice a magnificent old tree on the hillside. Walk to the tree and sit under it for a few moments, appreciating its magnificence. The tree may have a message for you. Listen closely. Notice the words, images, and feelings that come up for you. When you are ready, follow the path back the way you came, through the woods, crossing the stream, and eventually back to the pleasant place where you started the journey. Know you can return to this place and to anywhere you visited on your own whenever you like. Now it is time to come back fully.

Step 2: Each member is then encouraged to:

First, to briefly share their experience of the mindfulness practice.

What did you notice? What did the process make you think? Is there anything you would like to share?

How many were able to find a place to start with? How many found a tree? Did the tree have anything for you? What did you see? Was there anything unexpected (scary, fun, confusing, helpful, etc.)? What did you take away?

Second, 'check-in' i.e. share their present thoughts and feelings to help them to feel connected to the group/set.

What are you bringing to the room today? Your thoughts/feelings you may want to share with the group?

Participants were also introduced to the headspace website (www.headspace.com) which offers short mindfulness exercises for their perusal in their own time. Overall, the mindfulness exercises were well received in each group; facilitators observed that some got into it more

fully than others; only one participant openly shared discomfort in participating in the exercises and had the choice to opt out of the exercises.

Mindfulness Practice in action learning facilitation

The participants' experiences of mindfulness was captured through systematic collection of objective data collated through questionnaires, interviews and a focus group. The data provided evidence based practice of the application of mindfulness exercises within the action learning check-in process that contributed significantly to creating a relaxed and calm space, which further enhanced the learning environment within the action learning sets. The responses of the action learning members confirmed that the 5 to 7 minute mindfulness practice at the start of the action learning sessions, helped them to relax and become more aware of their own pattern of thoughts, which in turn improved concentration, empathy and flexibility in their thought process (Alexander *et al.*, 1987; Arguelles *et al.*, 2003, Brown and Rayan, 2003; Lakey *et al.*, 2008; Baron, 2016). This appeared to enable the action learning members to take a much more pragmatic approach to the complex and challenging work issues and stresses which were raised within their sets. It also enabled the action learning facilitator to be 'fully present' by 'heightened meta-awareness and decreased discursive cognition' (Kudesia and Tashi Nyiman, 2015:2).

Consequently, the facilitation of the mindfulness practices can embed a calm and relaxed environment within the action learning set and the action learning facilitator can apply such practice as process of action learning facilitation. However, the action learning facilitator must be aware that individual acceptance and engagement with mindfulness practice may vary amongst participants and therefore, will need to be sensitive in its application, as with other action learning processes. Overall, mindfulness practice 'heighten meta-awareness and decrease discursive cognition' (Kudesia and Tashi Nyiman, 2015:2), enabling the action learning members to become more aware of patterns of thought, dominant stories and preoccupations in the present moment, which improved their engagement in the action learning process.

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<http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2015/12/23/case-study-bluebay-asset-management.aspx>

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