

Mindful Leadership - Changing the Leadership Paradigm The Impact of Wellbeing on Leader and Organisational Performance

Introduction

A great deal of attention is currently being paid to the understanding and importance of personal wellbeing. The attention has been stimulated largely by national concerns about the growing incidence and cost of mental ill-health, the need to respond to international competition through a skilled, active workforce and the economic consequences of an ageing population. These demand-side challenges are being addressed in part by rapidly improving understanding of the brain physiology of mental wellbeing and the growing evidence base supporting the value of mindfulness-based practice.

The comprehensive Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project (2008), produced for The Government Office for Science, London, reviews wellbeing from childhood to old age, including working life, where it indicates that *'employers should foster work environments conducive to the enhancement of mental capital'*. The evidence from brain physiology and mindfulness experience suggests an opportunity to make a big impact on business productivity and sustainability through the adoption of some wellbeing practices.

The Context

- Organisations depend for survival not just on today's productivity but on preparing for tomorrow – through the creativity, innovation, wellbeing and resilience of key creators of change
- Fewer management layers and 24/7 communications have increased the number, breadth and complexity of demands on leaders, often leading to significant personal stress and some dysfunction
- Rapidly growing understanding of brain activity through fMRI scanning provides valuable insights into the differences in brain use of those who are performing optimally and those under excessive stress
- The current predominant organisational model unintentionally encourages use of the particular parts of the brain associated with threat, fear and avoidance of risk and directly militates against more creative and innovative outcomes and the sustained performance of individuals.

The Problem

The current predominant organisational model:

- places demand on people for dealing with increasingly complex issues, more outputs, at ever faster speed
- encourages multi-tasking
- promotes and measures short term performance, linking this to reward and progression
- tacitly encourages longer hours of work
- is relentless in its continuing demands.

At the human level this leads to:

- fearfulness and the avoidance of risk
- excessive task focus
- more superficial attention to individual issues
- less time for reflection and deeper learning
- no time to experiment, to try a new way
- less tolerance, less empathy and over-controlling of subordinates
- reduced motivation.

In the brain these behaviours are observed as high activity in the right pre-frontal cortex. Activity in the left pre-frontal cortex is correspondingly low.

Such behaviours also stimulate the sympathetic nervous system, continually provoking 'fight or flight' responses by increased production of adrenalin and noradrenalin, raising blood pressure and shutting down non-essential neural circuits in the brain. Continuous stimulation of this sort can

increase feelings of anxiety, nervousness and low mood, and can reduce effectiveness of the immune system.

Productivity, tolerance and creativity are thereby reduced, effects which, on an organisation-wide scale, can be extremely damaging to corporate performance.

Research from 15 countries on understanding the phenomena of absenteeism, high employee turnover, underperformance and frequent illness, concludes that these are frequently symptoms of work related stress (Office of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and the Centre of Economic Policy Research 2002).

Increasing the stimulation of the left pre-frontal cortex, which stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, directly addresses this phenomenon, lowering stress and cortisol levels, lowering blood pressure and bolstering the immune system.

The left pre-frontal cortex is also associated with curiosity, sensitivity, creativity, enthusiasm and openness – all factors which support learning, teamwork and good morale.

The challenge therefore is to find organisational ways of working which allow and help leaders to make balanced use of both right and left pre-frontal cortices, balancing achievement of tasks with time for maintaining personal wellbeing and skills thus reducing work related stress. The solution lies in organisations creating a sustaining work context and in individuals maintaining mental balance.

Towards a solution

Organisations need to understand that:

- there are direct links between the organisational culture they promote and the management practices which embody it, the sustained wellbeing and resilience of key staff, and the sustainability and performance of the business
- factors that lead to personal wellbeing are becoming increasingly understood, enabling organisations to create conditions in which individuals can be nurtured through careful attention, for example, to delegation, goal setting, performance management, reward design, learning and development opportunities and work/life balance
- they can also help key individuals directly by providing access to support in areas of mindfulness training and business coaching on issues specific to the individual.

Key individuals may need help to:

- understand that personal wellbeing and resilience are the keys to sustaining high levels of personal performance and growth
- identify the enhancement steps they might take
- build the confidence to move forward.

Effective approaches include *mindfulness practice* to improve individuals' meta-cognitive skills, enabling them to:

- see that their minds are not always focussed on where they want them to be
- disengage from unwanted or undermining thought patterns
- place the mind where they want it to be
- keep it there.

Combining mindfulness with targeted *business coaching* can:

- improve job performance from a base of greater wellbeing
- tackle specific work issues faced by the individual
- stretch performance by maximising the application of the individual's strengths on their business operational performance and leadership styles.

In conclusion

The authors of this paper see a major source of competitive advantage, organisational performance and sustainability for those who take best advantage of this new understanding.

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