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Mindfulness links to transformational leadership

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How trait mindfulness links to transformational leadership

A pioneering 2018 study by a Canadian research team, Erica Carleton, Julian Barling, and Melissa Trivisonno, speaks to coaches because it connects in a novel way the popular topic of mindfulness with transformational leadership.

Their article titled: [Leaders' Trait Mindfulness and Transformational Leadership: The Mediating Roles of Leaders' Positive Affect and Leadership Self-Efficacy](#), also offers new opportunities for leadership interventions.

What is transformational leadership?

The authors describe transformational leadership as *“inspiring followers to commit to a shared vision and goals for an organisation, by challenging them to be innovative and developing their own leadership capacity through coaching, mentoring, and provision of both challenge and support.”* (By the way, check out the classic book on **Transformational Leadership** by Bernard Bass and Ronald Riggio. Bass was the founding editor of The Leadership Quarterly.)

What is mindfulness?

The authors define mindfulness (edited quote):

1. *mindfulness reflects an intentional state of heightened awareness of, and attention to, present internal and external experiences.*
2. *the essence of this heightened awareness and attention is that it is nonjudgmental, characterized by emotional detachment, and avoids cognitive categorizations of the experience.*
3. *mindfulness allows for the simultaneous awareness and acceptance of more than one perspective.*
4. *mindfulness enables the nonjudgmental appreciation of, and non-reactivity toward, inner experiences.*

What is trait mindfulness?

Most definitions within organizational research view mindfulness as a “state” of consciousness, explain the authors, who make a good distinction between:

- **state** mindfulness as a temporary way of being, and
- **trait** mindfulness as a more stable and enduring personality trait

The study hypothesis and what it builds upon

Trait mindfulness, stable and enduring mindfulness, has recently been studied by another group as an antecedent to servant leadership, and shown to be positively associated with humility, standing back, and authenticity.

The research team hypothesized that the trait mindfulness of leaders is indirectly associated with transformational leadership, first by generating positive affect which in turn generates the self-efficacy needed to be a transformational leader.

Here are the research findings upon which their hypothesis rests.

There is a literature base linking *mindfulness* to *positive affect*, concluding that trait mindfulness:

- promotes emotional appraisals that are centered in the present, and are thus more neutral and objective
- reduces susceptibility to negative responses to negative experiences by avoiding negatively-biased memories
- reduces worry and anxiety about the future
- is associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of psychological capital
- predicts self-regulation and positive affect

The authors then note a connection between *positive affect* and *self-efficacy*:

- dispositional optimism and trait positive affect are associated with higher self-efficacy
- positive affect leads people to set more ambitious goals, be more confident and expect success

The connection between *each of positive affect and self-efficacy to transformational leadership* has also been well-studied. To summarize:

For positive affect: *“Leaders high in positive affect are more prosocial which enables them to draw upon more positive interactions with followers, view their contributions more positively, enhancing a positive vision of the future, and imparting their vision to followers....they are more positive, ambitious, inspirational, and influential when interacting with followers.”*

For self-efficacy: Leaders’ self-efficacy beliefs appear to improve the quality of leadership behaviors, and followers’ ratings of leaders’ willingness to change.

The study of trait mindfulness and transformational leadership

The study designed to test the hypothesis, using a mathematical model to assess indirect effects and serial mediation, identified 183 leader-follower pairings employed in North America (from a large online database). The leaders averaged 43 years old, with a nine-year leadership tenure. Followers had a mean age of 40, and the average tenure with their current leader was 6 years.

The leaders were asked to complete a self-report scale of trait mindfulness,

positive and negative affect, and leadership self-efficacy beliefs. Their followers were asked to complete a questionnaire about their leader's transformational leadership.

The results!

1. Leaders' trait mindfulness predicted leaders' positive affect.
2. Leaders' positive affect predicted leaders' self-efficacy beliefs.
3. Both leaders' positive affect and self-efficacy beliefs predicted transformational leadership.

The punch line: The positive effect of leaders' trait mindfulness on transformational leadership was mediated first by positive affect and then by self-efficacy beliefs.

This study points to potential beneficial effects of trait mindfulness, including more positive emotions and a more objective and detached perspective on negative experiences, along with more confidence and the ability to inspire and coach others to accomplish great things.

A relevant resource on trait mindfulness is the book "**Altered Traits**" by Dan Goleman and Richard Davidson, which explores the lasting personality traits that can emerge from long-term engagement in mindfulness practices. Enjoy Dan Goleman's 2017 **conference talk** based upon the book.

Takeaways for Coaches:

1. Rate your mindfulness using the **Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale**. Higher scores suggest higher trait mindfulness.
2. Broaden and deepen mindfulness training for yourself and the leaders you serve and enjoy the downstream effects.

Be a transformational leader, not just a coach - deepen your understanding and application of the components and impact of transformational leadership (role model, inspire visionaries, innovate, and coaching others).

"Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves."

- Nhat Hanh



From the IOC Team.

Coaching with science in mind.

Featured Article

Carleton, E., Barling, J., and Trivisonno, M. **Leaders' trait mindfulness and transformational leadership: The mediating roles of leaders' positive affect and leadership self-efficacy.** *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, Vol 50(3), Jul 2018, 185-194.

Browse IOC Resources on Transformational Leadership

Book: **Transformational Leadership.** Bass, Riggio

Book: **Altered Traits,** Dan Goleman, Richard Davidson

Conference Video: **The Science of Mindfulness,** Dan Goleman
