



BE THE TREE

How to Work Smarter, Not Harder
with Mindful Leadership

by Maggie DiStasi

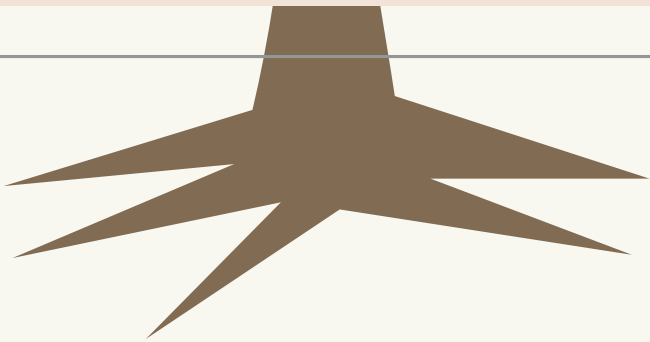


Table of Contents

Introduction	3
What is a mindful leader?.....	4
What are the qualities of a mindful leader?	5
How can practicing mindful leadership help me work smarter and not harder?	6
Be Observant	7
Be Creative	10
Be Perceptive	13
Be Process-Oriented	16
Be Aspirational.....	19
Conclusion.....	22
Bibliography.....	25
About the Author.....	26

Introduction

How to Work Smarter, Not Harder with Mindful Leadership

Be the Tree is all about working smarter and not harder with mindful leadership. I created it in response to:

- My own experience of finding myself with less time to think and more demands on my attention
- Discovering that many of my clients and colleagues are experiencing this too
- Recognizing that it's not our fault! The world is changing and we now live and work in a **PAID** environment (**P**ressure, **A**lways on, **I**nformation Overload, **D**istracted) (*Hougaard, 2016*)

The good news is, there are ways to work smarter without working harder. Some of these involve using our energy differently than we have before, adapting to the changing world around us and ultimately evolving as humans.

I will introduce the concept of mindful leadership and some of the essential qualities of a mindful leader. Using stories and real-life examples, I'll demonstrate these qualities in action and how they directly contribute to working smarter, not harder. I'll share tips for practice to help strengthen your own mindful leadership towards experiencing work and life with more energy, creativity and inspiration.

What is a mindful leader?

The research and writing about mindful leadership is growing, each investigator offering their own take on the topic.

Maria Gonzalez, author of *Mindful Leadership*, says: *"To be an effective leader of others, you must first start with self-leadership. One of the keys to self-leadership is being mindful. Mindfulness is simply noticing the way things are. By being mindful, you can transform your life, your organization, and even your community. The first step is to transform yourself."*

Janice Marturano, Founder of *The Institute for Mindful Leadership*, and *Doug Silsbee*, Creator of *Presence-Based Coaching*, echo this idea using their own preferred descriptors.

In my own experience and in the work I do with both emerging and experienced leaders, I have similarly found that mindful leadership is about choosing how you show up in each moment and becoming more intentional about the impact of your presence - on yourself and on those around you. This is the working definition I'll refer back to throughout this series.

What are the qualities of a mindful leader?

Marturano and Gonzalez describe many key qualities of mindful leadership including: being calm, focused, clear, and compassionate, to name a few. Many of these qualities are the outcomes of mindfulness practices that the leader takes on. The qualities that I share differ slightly because they are the foundational qualities from which these outcomes can then become possible. These qualities include:

- Observant (self)
- Creative
- Perceptive
- Process-oriented
- Aspirational

As you can imagine, a person who is self-observant, i.e., who can step back and observe their own thoughts and emotions without attachment, tends to be calmer than those who are relentlessly caught up in their own thoughts and feelings without awareness.

Similarly, someone who is perceptive, i.e., who can appreciate the complexity in a situation and adapt their thinking accordingly, is going to have more clarity than those who persist in bringing logical, black-and-white thinking to every scenario.

The good news is that each of these foundational qualities can be developed with practice and I'll share examples and practice tips for each one.

How can practicing mindful leadership help me work smarter and not harder?

This is what we all want to know, right? With increasing demands on our time and attention, pressure to produce more with less, and constant media exposure to real and perceived threats to our bodies, our loved ones, our careers, our planet and our future, many of us are reaching a breaking point in terms of knowing how to respond. We know the old ways aren't working anymore but we don't know what to do about it or what to try next.

We need to evolve. We need to think and be different than we ever have before. Instead of being the superhero who runs faster and leaps higher than everyone else, we need to be the tree that stands calmly in the midst of chaos, bending with the winds of change and soaking up what we can to feed our minds and our bodies. The tree is the mindful leader of the forest and now it's time for us to become mindful leaders in our work and lives in order to withstand the fast pace and discover a new sense of balance and influence in the world around us.

Be Observant

Road Rage Anyone?

A couple of months ago, I drove across the city on my way to a business meeting. I wanted to make a good impression, so I made sure that I left my office in good time.

Traffic was heavier than I expected. There was construction on the route that I chose and several cars were lined up ahead of me. As I watched the minutes click by on the clock, I grew anxious. My chest tightened and suddenly it was harder to breathe. The driver in the car in front of me was taking his time and I couldn't find an opening to pass him. My hands began to sweat and my thoughts became frantic. "Come on," I thought, and likely said out loud, "get out of my way!"

Suddenly, there was a small opening to pass. I yanked on the wheel, stepped on the gas and swerved wildly around the car in front of me. Coming upon a parked car in my lane, I then cut back in front of the slower car, hitting the brakes so I wouldn't collide with the car in front of me. I looked back and saw the driver of the slower car more clearly for the first time: he was young, had lots of tattoos, sported a spiky crew-cut and drove with a cigarette in one hand. How do you think he reacted to my terrible driving?

Well, he honked at me, but only for a few seconds. He threw a hand up in the air, as if to say, "what the...?" But that was it. He didn't speed up or tailgate me. He didn't yell or get aggressive. I watched him nervously in my rear-view mirror but he continued smoking his cigarette and driving at the same slow pace, even though I'd almost run him off the road a few moments earlier.

I was mortified by my own behaviour. I'm a mindfulness practitioner and yet I had behaved like a mindless lunatic

behind the wheel, hijacked by my sense of urgency and unable to shift my perspective in response to the unexpected reality of a traffic jam. I ruminated about it for days afterward.

The World is Changing - Yet You Still Have Choice

The fact of the matter is that traffic is getting worse everywhere we go. All sorts of things are changing as a result of population growth and other factors. It's no longer enough to try and find a shortcut or an advantage - we need to adapt to our changing reality by developing the mindful leadership quality of being self-observant. Here's why:

Whenever you can consciously step back and observe yourself in the moment, you put yourself back in a position of choice. You can choose how to respond to the pressure and tension of a changing world in a way that truly supports you. In my case, if I had been able to notice and name my increasing sense of urgency and the frantic nature of my thoughts, I would have been able to reality-test the situation and make a better choice about how to respond, i.e., pull over and send my meeting partner a text to let them know I may be a couple of minutes late, or simply drive in a way that prioritizes my safe arrival and the safety of the drivers around me.

As a result of not being observant in that moment, I also spent valuable minutes and hours doubting myself and eroding my self-confidence. I was ashamed of my behaviour and I questioned my judgment, and I'm sure I carried that over into my business meeting. I gave away so much emotional energy that could have served me better in that meeting and beyond. Being observant influences our ability to work smarter and not harder by allowing us to make better choices and preserve our precious physical and emotional energy. We are then bet-

ter equipped to be fully present for those situations that matter more, such as important professional or personal conversations.

Practice Tip

First, think back to a time when you acted in a way that you later regretted. What were your thoughts like in that moment, how were you feeling? If you had stepped back to observe yourself in the moment, what other choice might you have been able to make?

Practice: Pick a time of day to consciously step back and observe how you are thinking and what you are feeling - set a daily reminder in your phone or calendar so that you don't forget. Notice the impact of your thoughts on your state of mind and body. The more often you practice stepping back to self-observe, the less likely you'll be to give away valuable energy unnecessarily.

Be Creative

Head-banging (and not the long-haired, rocker kind)

I can't believe it's been almost 10 years since I handed in my letter of resignation and effectively walked away from a successful career in financial technology management. I had longed to be more fulfilled in my work for several years prior however it wasn't until I faced an uncertain prognosis following cancer treatment that I knew I'd have to take a bigger step. Otherwise, I risked spending what might be the last few years of my existence being miserable.

The good news is that it's been 12 years since my stem cell transplant and I am officially considered "cured." Just as good is that I can now say I am doing work that I love - in other words, my work allows me to develop, express and experience the best of myself in service of others. It hasn't been an easy journey though.

When I first left the bank, I was uncertain about what to do next and about how to be successful in the professional coaching career I eventually chose. I remember sitting at my desk in my newly converted home office, staring at a list of to-do's and having no inclination to act on any of them. I couldn't determine which was the "right" activity to spend time on - Should I write a bunch of coaching-related blogs and hope someone finds them useful? Should I try to figure out how to create my own website or spend money I didn't have to hire someone else? Should I get a part-time job while trying to establish my coaching practice? I didn't know and I was stressed out and growing increasingly frustrated by my inability to answer these questions.

It turns out that I was using the wrong kind of thinking to solve my problem. I was approaching my new career as if it was a simple challenge, one that required logical, straightforward

thinking. Figuring out a brand-new career and how to be successful in it is not a simple challenge. If I had an idea about how I would develop this career or what I was aiming to create, it would have been complicated at the very least. However, I did not know what my goals were nor what I wanted to achieve which made this a complex situation. And complexity requires creative thinking: the spontaneous, free-flowing, goal-emergent, organic kind.

Spare your precious mind and time by being more creative

Dr. Danny Penman defines creativity as being “characterized by the ability to perceive the world in new ways, to find hidden patterns, to make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena and to generate solutions.” It’s literally about bringing forth something new into the world - whether it’s a worthwhile objective for an entrepreneurial business, a new way to more effectively communicate with a family member or colleague, or an approach to becoming present in the moment despite the overwhelming fullness of the day.

In today’s complexity-rich world, being creative is a mindful leadership quality that you can’t afford not to develop and it’s a key aspect of working smarter and not harder. Think back to a time when you tried to think up a logical answer to a problem that was far from simple: do you remember losing any sleep over it, or being only half-present for good opportunities and experiences because your mind was consumed by your attempts to solve for X? How might that have gone differently if you had been able to recognize the complexity of the issue and allowed your mind to creatively pull information together such that an answer or next step emerged?

Once I was able to let go of needing to know an answer to my complex career problem and became more open to making connections among all of the possibilities and opportunities that existed, I became clearer about my next steps and was able to take action in the best direction.

Practice Tip

To practice being creative in response to complexity, try this 2-step exercise:

1. Identify a big question for which you've been struggling to find an answer - articulate the question as clearly as you can for yourself.
2. Now let go of needing to know the answer to your complex problem for a moment. Think about what else you may have been noticing: coincidences, signs, ideas that you may have dismissed or forgotten. What's the hidden message in these? Where are they trying to point your attention instead? Notice any new thoughts or ideas that emerge as you consider these connections, new thoughts and ideas which you've effectively created. Consider what support or resources you need to pursue those that hold the most energy for you.

Be Perceptive

Don't blame me, I predicted the Trump presidency

I'm not always the first to spot a trend and grab onto it. For example, I once told my husband that cargo pants would never catch on. I ended up owning 2 pairs and loved them. However, there are a few distinct aspects of life in which I can be pretty perceptive. Being perceptive has paid off in terms of responding well to scenarios, and limiting regret and self-doubt.

Does anyone remember Nortel? It was a telecommunications and networking equipment manufacturer that filed for bankruptcy in 2009. I happened to own a few shares in the company thanks to a Bell Canada spin-off. Long before the bankruptcy filing, the company enjoyed a lot of market success. I enjoyed watching my stock price rise. At some point, however, I remember developing an uneasy feeling. I worked in a brokerage firm at the time and must have heard something about the stock that didn't sit right. However, none of my brokers seemed to think much of the news and they held onto the stock. I continued to pick up strange signals though and eventually decided to liquidate. It was a good thing I did. The stock plunged shortly afterward and I was left with enough money to contribute to a down payment on our house.

In 2008, I worked in the prime brokerage department of a bank and all of our clients were institutional hedge funds. Early in the year, I started to perceive a shift in the market of some kind. Maybe it was something a hedge fund manager said or a hint in the daily write-ups but I had a strong feeling that things weren't going right. Retail brokers were staying calm and touting the usual buy-and-hold message. That probably made me more nervous! Once again, I liquidated my non-RRSP portfolio, ensuring that we would have liquidity through what turned out to

be a global financial crisis. It's not a decision that everyone would make, however, it gave me the peace of mind I needed to weather that crisis.

It's not just finances that I have keen perceptions about. Ten minutes into the 2nd debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, I said out loud to no one in particular, "he's won." There was something about the way Trump spoke and the emotional impact of his messages that touched off my instincts. I hoped for a Clinton win yet I wasn't surprised by the final result.

Vet your perceptions to discover opportunities

Predicting Trump's win didn't give me any particular advantage, unfortunately. However, my ability to perceive certain data in my environment (that not everybody else picks up or takes seriously) has had important implications. I've sensed changes in organizational structures at an early stage and been able to choose my next step rather than have it forced on me. I've picked up on subtle shifts in my personal and professional relationships which have enabled me to address potential problems before they could become bigger issues. I've tuned in to a hint of business potential and developed it further.

The trick to developing the mindful leadership quality of being perceptive is to become aware of where your perceptions are most sharp in your life and trust them. Do your research, ask more questions. Follow your natural instincts and find out if there is something worth paying attention to. If you pick up on these early enough, you won't have to make any sudden or reactive decisions later on. Rather, you can take your time to vet your perceptions and determine the wisest course of action, whether it involves avoiding a hardship or capitalizing on an opportunity.

In terms of working smarter and not harder, being perceptive helps you preserve your precious energy for worthwhile opportunities rather than giving it away unnecessarily. A lot of worry, regret, and second-guessing can be avoided when you trust your perceptions and take action to investigate them. Think back to a time when you didn't trust your perception and forged blindly ahead. What happened? How much sleep did it cost you, that you couldn't afford to lose?

Practice Tip

Being perceptive starts by being aware of how you are perceptive already. Think about the different aspects of your life: family, work, community, projects. When do you remember picking up on something out of the ordinary, big or small, with either positive or negative tones? What sense were you using and how can you lean on that more?

Another tip for those who aren't so tuned into your senses: take a walk in your neighbourhood. Give your senses permission to choose your path: what do your eyes and ears notice in particular, and how does your brain interpret that data and decide where you go?

Be Process-Oriented

Evolution, Not Revolution

Before I transitioned out of my first career in financial technology management, I worked on one last major project. We were meant to replace our in-house system with two new vendor systems that would be integrated with one another. I didn't have a good feeling about it from the start.

From my perspective of working closely with the technology systems we used, initially as a business user and later in a management role, it made more sense to evolve the systems we had already, i.e., to update our old reliable system and integrate it with one new vendor product that could give us the competitive advantage we were seeking. Our IT department recommended this approach as well.

Instead, our leadership team chose to completely replace our old system in an apparent effort to woo potential clients who may be more familiar with the new vendors. Critical issues on the project began to surface immediately. One of the vendor products could not handle our data the way we needed and the only workaround was to hire a team of people to correct the mistakes the new system would make every day! A hiring process was initiated.

More problems arose and, as we budgeted to address each issue, our costs went up dramatically and our time to delivery was delayed by well over a year. At least 4 project managers were hired and fired along the way. Team morale was terrible for months on end.

No one on the project team, including myself, was willing to speak up at crucial moments. This was the largest project I'd worked on yet and I kept second-guessing my own opinion because no one else was saying anything. Only one of the newer team members once whispered to me,

“evolution, not revolution,” validating what I felt had been required from the beginning.

The project eventually failed and I took my leave of the industry shortly after. I would later find out that the team went back to the drawing board and decided to implement the evolutionary approach after all, using a combination of the legacy system and only one new vendor product. From what I understand, the project went smoothly and those systems are still in place today.

Quality AND Quantity

Our project team was initially hellbent on the goal of replacing a system that worked with two new systems that hadn't been tested together, despite mounting evidence that this approach couldn't be successful. There were multiple failures along the way, one of them being the very nature of goal-setting in organizations.

From *Beyond Goals* by David, Clutterbuck and Megginson, we learn that “because goals focus attention, they reduce people’s awareness of other factors that may be important to success. The lack of context makes it easier to focus on the wrong goals, and we would add that it also makes people less able to recognize when a goal has become inappropriate. [Setting and pursuing goals] may cause people to ignore important dimensions of performance that are not specified by the goal-setting system.”

This reality calls for the mindful leadership quality of being process-oriented, which is exactly as it sounds: having an appreciation for the process of working towards something and allowing yourself (and/or your team) to be influenced by what you discover along the way i.e., a new or better goal. It's about prioritizing the quality of your experience just as much as the outcomes to support your success at every stage.

When you pay more attention to process and how you are choosing to show up along the way, you inherently work smarter and not harder. You waste less time second-guessing yourself or having to backtrack and start over. You build confidence in yourself and your capacity to respond to what is going on right now and you can make the most optimal and effective choices moving forward.

Practice Tip

Consider a work or personal project that you're working on right now and reflect on the following:

- What has that experience been like so far?
- How attached are you to the end goal?
- If you knew that you might never achieve that goal, what would you pay more attention to in the meantime?

Be Aspirational

Spinning in Circles

The question of “what do I want?” has always been a bit tough for me to answer. Maybe it’s because I’m the youngest in my family and by the time I came along, my frazzled parents were more concerned about whether my siblings and I were going to kill each other and less about what any of us actually wanted (update: my brother and sister and I are all reasonably healthy adults now).

Maybe it’s because being female is traditionally less associated with individual desires and more focused on collective needs.

Maybe it’s because my mind works in a more organic way, preferring to sense what is emerging rather than to establish early goals that may actually limit potential with their defined boundaries.

In our problem-solving, goal-fixated, society I often felt that my inability to name what I wanted was a personal defect or fault. I couldn’t recognize nor trust my own process for discovering a new path or objective based on what felt right and seemed sensible to me.

And, like many people, my attention was often focused on what I didn’t want instead - the job I no longer liked, the work colleagues I could no longer tolerate, persistence with a business strategy that was counterproductive - and it wasn’t getting me very far.

Aspire to Inspire

Coach training taught me the importance of taking the time to imagine and articulate what you aspire to, and, just as importantly, to discover your own pace and approach to that process. It's difficult to move forward if you don't have some idea of where you'd like to go yet it's also reasonable to expect that it may take a little while for your destination to become clear.

With support from my own coach, I began to appreciate my organic and process-oriented approach to sensing and moving in the direction of my desires. I learned to recognize when my thoughts were focused on fear and avoidance and practiced consciously shifting my thinking towards better possible outcomes - for the day, for a project I was working on, or for a challenge in a relationship. People began noticing a difference in how I was showing up. They could sense my new optimism and were better able to suggest ideas and connections that could directly contribute to helping me achieve my true aspirations.

The mindful leader quality of being aspiring is essential if you want to create positive change in your own life and/or influence it in others. It creates a sense of shared purpose that can engage and motivate people to take the steps necessary to close the gap between a current reality and a desired future.

When you develop the quality and skills of being aspiring, you are also working smarter and not harder. If you don't sense or think about what could make your work or life better, or if your attention is mostly focused on what you don't want, you will likely stay in the same place where you are now regardless of whether you are satisfied with it or not. Aspiring helps to optimize the use of your mind in the moment and discover what is truly possible.

Practice Tip

As you begin each day, reflect on the following:

1. What do I aspire to today? (Or put another way: what is the best possible outcome I can hope for?)
2. What will it feel like when I've achieved my aspiration/outcome?
3. How do I need to be in order to make that happen?

At the end of the day, reflect again: what happened? What impact did your aspiring have and what can you learn for tomorrow?

Conclusion

Mindful leadership is about knowing ourselves through mindful attention and nurturing those particular qualities that can help us discover the best opportunities to create positive change in our work, life and communities.

As the winds of global change blow faster and faster, we can find ourselves running to keep up and feeling breathless a lot of the time. When we “be the tree” instead, we recognize that we don’t have to run to keep up with all of the changes. Rather, we can stand strong yet flexible in our ground, working smarter and not harder:

1. Rooted in what we can observe in ourselves and those around us - and giving less of our energy away to preventable scenarios (like driving recklessly and regretting it later),
2. Choosing to think creatively in response to complex challenges - instead of fruitlessly using the kind of logical thinking that is better suited to simpler problems,
3. Perceiving what we can and researching our hunches - rather than ignoring them because it seems easier or because no one else seems to be picking up on them,
4. Appreciating process and allowing new goals to emerge - instead of blindly pursuing a goal that may no longer be appropriate,
5. Focusing on what we aspire to, and not just what we want to avoid - so that we are motivated to stretch outside our comfort zones and be moving towards a future we truly want to create.

If you are interested in learning more about mindful leadership, I am happy to share resources with you. Recently, I’ve been inspired by *Doug Silsbee’s* book

called *"Presence-Based Leadership: Complexity Practices for Clarity, Resilience, and Results That Matter."* Doug has been an unofficial mentor of mine for a long time. He continued to write and inspire so many of us right up until his passing from terminal cancer.

In his last book, Doug talks about "dropping into stillness" whenever you can - while standing in line for coffee, waiting at a red light, sitting in a room waiting for a meeting to begin. Consciously letting go of any thoughts you're holding onto and focusing your attention on your breath or other sensations in your body. This simple act can help you re-connect to your roots and access those qualities that best support how you show up in that moment and the impact of your presence on those around you. I am grateful to Doug for leaving the gift of his powerful words as his final legacy.

What's next? Changing the game.

Lately, I've sensed something new emerging as well: a desire and drive to speak up more, to fight if I have to, for the values that I hold dear; to connect and build collective capacity to influence real, positive change in our communities and our world.

I know the mindful leadership qualities I've shared will continue to serve me as I follow this path, and they will also help me identify and support other game-changers out there.

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About the Author

Maggie DiStasi, ACPC, PCC, is a Professional Career Transition and Leadership Coach, specializing in a process-oriented approach to creating positive change in your career and/or leadership (think: creative, mindful, organic, goal-emergent). Her approach is particularly helpful if you don't know exactly what you want to do next and you want to be thoughtful and purposeful about exploring what's possible.

Maggie is also a faculty member of the *Business Coaching Advantage Program™* and a member of the management team for the program's parent company, *People Dynamics Learning Group*. To learn about any of the coaching programs or business coach training programs she is involved in, please contact her in the following ways:

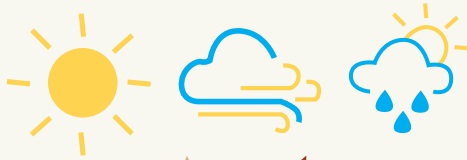
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BE THE TREE

Framework for Mindful Leadership

ENVIRONMENTAL Factors (to consider)



EXPRESSION
of yourself
in the world

The
STRENGTH
of your
presence

OBSERVANT ●

CREATIVE ●

PERCEPTIVE ●

● ASPIRING

● PROCESS-ORIENTED