

Mindful Leadership



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During a recent consulting engagement, a member of my team reminded our client that when an organization adopts a large number of ambitious, complex goals, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Instead of feeling "doable," success may feel out of reach. The key to tackling big goals, she explained, is to create opportunities for short-term wins, or alternatively, break long-term goals into short-term tasks that can be completed and celebrated more often.

Finding Happiness...at Work

This week I've been reading journalist Dan Harris' wonderful book, [*10% Happier: How I Tamed the Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress without Losing My Edge, and Found Self-Help That Actually Works-A True Story*](#). As usual, I was drawn to the title of the book when I saw *10% Happier* on the shelf at an airport bookstore. In this surprisingly funny book, Harris describes his journey from wanting to be "on" 24/7, to permitting occasional time for self-reflection. The book chronicles the TV journalist's on-air panic attack and subsequent journey to healing and self-awareness. After consulting with several well-known self-help gurus, Harris eventually discovers and embraces meditation as a way to quiet the doubtful voice in his head. Of course Harris traveled a long road to find peace in his mind, but he conquered the journey by breaking it down and taking it one day at a time.

As consultants to mission-driven organizations, we encounter the full spectrum of workplace happiness and discontentment-sometimes in the same nonprofit! During conversations with nonprofit employees we learn about how favoritism can foil mission fervor. We discover that when workplace rules don't apply across the board, the employee handbook is more wishful thinking than workplace guide. We also meet once-idealist nonprofit employees who feel that the commitments made during hiring and on-boarding were simply hollow promises. Instead of challenging work, management support, and the opportunity to feel deeply connected to the nonprofit's mission, these staff members have learned to keep their heads down and opinions to themselves. These cultural calamities seem to occur the most when nonprofit leaders and staff members get bogged down with day-to-day work, failing to celebrate incremental steps taken toward achieving their missions. While nonprofit teams should be growing 10% happier as they move forward, some employees are falling behind, feeling sluggish, stagnant, or snubbed.

Disillusionment is a two way street. While many line-staff view their superiors as ineffective leaders, too many

managers complain about team performance without taking any steps to change how teams are formed and how they interact in the workplace. Instead of judging each other solely on our tangible results, perhaps it's time to focus on the "means." How we work together may be a better indicator of success than you think.

As I read *10% Happier*, I couldn't help but wonder whether a new form of leadership is required in our increasingly competitive nonprofit sector: mindful leadership. Mindful leaders are those who:

- Care deeply about the emotional, physical and mental well-being of their staff, not just the volume of material they produce;
- Urge, nudge, cajole and support the ongoing professional development of all staff;
- Hand off leadership roles and opportunities to less experienced team members to give everyone the chance to develop and hone leadership skills;
- Resist assigning project and work teams and permit team leaders to involve any and all staff who bring distinctive perspectives or experiences to the conversation;
- Take time to celebrate small-as well as big-"wins" in the workplace;
- Allow experimentation and failure while coaching their teams to bounce back from missteps. Mindful leaders understand that all creative and successful people fail. Learning to forgive your own failures and the mistakes of others is fundamental to resilience. Instead of focusing on "who screwed up," ask: "what did we learn?"

Few of us are capable of making wholesale changes in our leadership styles and approaches. Instead of letting go of the instinctive managerial habits you've been practicing for decades, resolve to break down your transformation into manageable phases. Phase #1: be a 10% better leader. Strive to add "mindfulness" to your repertoire of leadership talents and maybe your employees will become 10% happier, too.

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