



Getting One Second Ahead

5 Mantras for Mindful Leadership

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with Jacqueline Carter *and* Gillian Coutts

In today's complex, fast-paced, always-on business environment, speed matters.

As leaders, you need to be able to rapidly sift through an overload of information and multiple distractions to make the best decisions for your organization. Time is of the essence. Everything is urgent. The most common words for many leaders are “more” and “now.”

What if you could enhance your focus and clarity, improve your effectiveness, have more time and less stress?

The key is getting “One Second Ahead” of your autopilot reactions to external stimuli and being more mindful in where you place your precious time and attention. Too many of us allow ourselves to get overwhelmed by daily demands and pressures and do lots of things, but not necessarily the right things that generate the best results.

The underlying challenge is that our mind can have a mind of its own, making it difficult to manage our attention. Recent scientific studies suggest that our ability to pay attention is getting less and less. If managing attention is key to realizing results, this is a significant issue for all of us—not only in terms of ourselves as leaders but also in how we manage and support our teams, colleagues, and clients.

To put a number on it, research suggests that, on average, 46.9% of the time mind is wandering. From a business context this means that almost half our working hours we are focused, efficient, and effective, and the rest of the time we are distracted, inefficient, wasting time and energy.

If managing our attention is at the root of the problem, then training the attentional muscle is the key to addressing it.

In this article, I would like to share five mantras I have found to be extremely effective for leaders to get “One Second Ahead” to enhance performance, creativity and well-being. The foundation is the practice and strategic application of mindfulness to every day work and, specifically, training the mind to be more calm, clear, and focused.

Mindful Leadership Mantra #1: **Be Here Now**

After leading a workshop in New York, one of the attendees approached me for personal advice. He was in his forties and a successful entrepreneur. He said: “I understand the benefits of mindfulness and the theory you have explained, but I am busy and need a short version. Can you give me something simple?” It can be a gift to be challenged to simplicity, and my response came instantly: “Be Here Now.”

The past is gone, the future has not arrived. All we have is the present moment. If we are not here now, we are missing it.

Being here now requires you to close every moment behind you. Before you enter a meeting, make sure you have mentally closed what you just come from. Before opening an email, make sure to mentally close the last. When coming home after work, make sure to close down work.

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Being here now allows us to see reality clearly, as it is. Not as it used to be, or as we would like it to be. Seeing reality clearly is our best chance of making the best choices—moment to moment—in business and in life.

Being here now is what mindfulness is about. It is the essence of getting “one second ahead” of our own thoughts and distractions. All it takes is practice—mindfulness practice.

To be more in the here and now, I highly recommend establishing a daily mindfulness training practice. It doesn't need to take more than ten minutes a day. To get you started, download an app, read a book or attend a class. A daily training of mindfulness training has proven to enhance focus, effectiveness and wellbeing, and decrease stress. Consider what it could do for you.

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Mindful Leadership Mantra #2: **Zero Tolerance for Clutter**

In today's frenetic speed and 24/7 distractions, our mind is under constant siege. Our ability to master the clutter-overload directly impacts our performance. And in my own experience, a key to success today is to not tolerate clutter.

I run a global organization. We have operations in 24 countries, serving more than 200 large international clients. I travel 150 days a year and receive more than 100 emails a day coming from ten different time zones. Despite the enormous amount of activities, I work and live by a policy of zero tolerance for clutter. Specifically, I do not receive work emails or text notifications on my home computer or phone, I do not have multiple applications open on my desktop, my workspace is always clean and clear, I limit my social engagements, and I challenge all members of our organization to reduce clutter by being focused, calm, and clear minded.

Just because technology enables us to be “always-on” does not mean it is healthy for us to be, always checking emails, responding to texts, and constantly distracted. One of the best ways to reduce clutter in our work lives is to look at our tools and technology and decide whether they are really making us more efficient and effective, or making us more scattered and unproductive.

Here is a simple example. How often do you check emails in between meetings even though you don't actually have time to respond to any of them? Sure, there are times when you need to check if a really important message has come in, but most of the time all you are doing is downloading a whole bunch of things you can't respond to right now and carrying them into your next meeting. Essentially, you are filling your head with a lot of mental clutter that could negatively impact your performance and effectiveness.

The same is true for other clutter that we unintentionally allow to impact our mental effectiveness. The more we can reduce the clutter in our work lives, the more productive we can be.

There are two ways that we can reduce clutter. By training our mind to let go of unnecessary distractions—as we do in the basic mindfulness training—we minimize the amount of clutter in our internal landscape. Secondly, by spending time evaluating how we use technology, how we manage our working environment, and how we manage our time and activities, we can reduce clutter in our external reality.

Consider for yourself one thing that you could do to reduce clutter in your daily work. Make a commitment to implement it for the next two weeks and see what impact it has on you and your performance.

Mindful Leadership Mantra #3: **Avoid Action Addiction**

Researchers from London Business School have found that the pressures of modern organizations can negatively impact our ability to prioritize and manage our time well. In-depth studies of leaders in Sony, LG and Lufthansa make them conclude that, “Very few use their time as effectively as they could. They think they’re attending to pressing matters, but they’re really just spinning their wheels”.

Another term for spinning our wheels is action addiction. Action addiction is when we mistake productivity with activity. It makes us lose focus on what is important. It makes us run really fast, but without clear sense of direction. It makes us do a lot of things, but not necessarily the right things. Action addiction is a very common condition for most of us nowadays and it is rooted in our neurological make-up.

Action addiction is caused by the hormone dopamine. When released in the brain it provides us a sense of enjoyment, relaxation and gratification. It is released when we give into impulses and it is highly addictive. The brain is constantly looking for a new dopamine kick, and short, quickly achieved tasks do the trick.

Checking and responding to emails is a good provider of dopamine kicks. When we give in to an impulse, like checking emails, we experience the instant gratification of dopamine released in the brain. It gives us a short-term pleasure. And doing this repeatedly creates addiction.

To some degree, we are all action addicts. But with mindfulness practice, the urge to simply act is reduced and we consider a more naturally deliberated response. Studies show that mindfulness increases the production of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin increases our impulse control and makes us more responsive and less reactive. It makes us focus on long term goals rather than short-term gratification.

In other words, mindfulness training increases our natural orientation towards dealing with the most important things in work and life—rather than being dictated by the constant noise of distractions. In an attention economy, action addiction may well be one of our biggest threats to work productivity, and mindfulness may well be a foundational part of the solution.

If you have tried to practice mindfulness but you have a tough time sitting still, you may be suffering from some degree of action addiction. Ask yourself whether your need “to act” is helping or hurting your effectiveness. Consider how adding a little more stillness in your daily routine might help you speed up by slowing down.

When we slow down momentarily and let go of doing things, we allow the brain to let go of the immediate urge for dopamine and we can focus and choose our actions out of clarity and freedom, rather than impulses. That way we can better pursue the larger goals in life like kindness, happiness, or whatever it may be for you. Think about what this could mean for you.

Mindful Leadership Mantra #4: **Busyness is a choice**

The Dalai Lama was coming to town. More than 10,000 people were coming together to see him. Over 500 volunteers, dozens of security people, and masses of journalists had to be coordinated. The person behind it all was Lakha—an unassuming man in his late 70s and an old study mate of the Dalai Lama.

I caught up with Lakha in the middle of the event. There was intense activity setting up security, managing the crowds, and taking care of the press. I asked him what seemed to be an obvious question at the time, “How are you managing all the busyness?” Lakha turned to me, looked at me calmly and said, “There is lots of activity, but I am not busy.”

His eyes and presence spoke louder than his words. He was overseeing a massive project with numerous deadlines and details to manage. There was lots going on, but it did not impact his mental peace. He was not busy.

On that day, I realized clearly that busyness is a choice. We all have lots of things we need to do. But if there are 10 things you need to do today and you can only realistically get 5 of them done, then worrying about not being able to get the 10 done is a waste of time.

But in today's work context, being busy has become a badge of honor. If we are busy we are important. If we are busy, it's because we are committed and working hard. It's in the DNA of our modern workplace. If we are not busy, there is an underlying assumption that we must be lazy and not productive. But Lakha showed a clear alternative: having many activities and being highly effective and productive, but maintaining mental clarity and calm.

There are good reasons to choose to not be "busy." There is little doubt that busyness enhances our stress and can negatively impact our performance and well-being. In Chinese, the word "busy" consists of two symbols, one representing the word "killing" and the second representing the word "heart".

Think about that the next time you say how busy you are. Consider the value you place on being busy and what choices you can make to reduce busyness for yourself and your teams.

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Mindful Leadership Mantra #5: **Compassion**

Many people think compassion is simply being soft and gentle, but compassion is incredibly strategic in a business context. Teams work harder for leaders who are kind to them. Customers stick with organizations that demonstrate a genuine interest in their success and well-being.

Compassion, kindness, and care always wins, especially in an increasingly fragmented and ever-changing reality, and definitely in business. When everything around us changes, the stability of true connection with others can become the stabilizing factor that increases resilience, engagement, and performance.

Simply put, compassion is the intention of wanting to be of benefit to the person or people you are with. At its deepest level, it is altruistic, with no expectation of return. Imagine what the world would be like if we all embodied that intention.

However, it is not about pleasing others. Compassion can be tough. A compassionate, but firm feedback session can be the most helpful thing you can do for one of your team. And when we have to lay off people or manage major changes, compassion is essential. We cannot change the fact that businesses must adapt to thrive and survive. But we can change the dynamic and experience of tough change situations. Not only for others, but also for ourselves.

For leaders, one thing must come before compassion for others—compassion for self. As leaders we are appointed to serve the greater good. And in that attempt, we can lose sight of our own needs. We can end up depleting our energy and wellbeing, and thereby the ability to be of service.

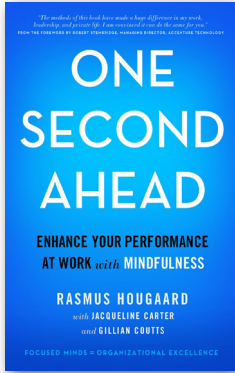
In a world of constant change, disruption, climate change, and social inequality, compassion becomes the glue that makes us stick together. We as leaders, at any level, have the opportunity to walk in front and become role models for a better world.

In short, compassion helps yourself, your business, and the world. It's hard to argue against. And if at this point you ask yourself, "when is the right time to be kind?" the Dalai Lama gives a simple advice: "Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible."

Take a moment to think about how each of these mindful leadership mantras can be of benefit to you. Perhaps there is one that resonates strongly with you that you want to use as your guidepost for the rest of the day. Perhaps you want to try taking one each day for the next five days and see what impact each of them will have on your performance, effectiveness, and well-being.

It is never too late to get "one second ahead." Start training your mind to be more responsive and less reactive to the realities of our modern business context. There is no time like the present. **Consider it a gift you are giving yourself and start practicing today.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS | **Rasmus Hougaard** is an internationally recognized expert in bringing mindfulness to organizations. With his team of consultants in [Potential Project](#), he has served hundreds of organizations and executives.

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