

Mindful Leadership: Using Yoga and Mindfulness Techniques to Enhance Leadership Skills in College Students

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Introduction

There is a need for recent graduates joining the workforce to be leaders that are willing to demonstrate high standards, excellent skills, and good attitudes (Soo & Ali, 2017). However, it is common for leaders in their careers to face stress as they go about their work (Harms et al., 2017). Stress can be related to the pressure of having to meet the high expectations of employers and the demands at a specific time, causing a direct effect on their emotional state (Syrek et al. 2013). Furthermore, Bass and Bass (2008) suggest stress has the potential to affect people's well-being. As a result, there may be an increase in emotional arousal, frustration, defensiveness, as well as physiological symptoms such as difficulty breathing. Considering the negative consequences stress can have on leaders, we argue programs that provide leadership education should incorporate curriculum to teach how to improve emotional well-being and mitigate stress. Therefore, the Leadership Academy of the College of Agricultural Sciences at Oregon State introduced a mindful leadership workshop using yoga, meditation, and mindfulness techniques to teach students how to cultivate focus, motivation and compassion in the service of others.

Mindfulness is defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2011) as a state of "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (p.291). Researchers suggest these practices can help people manage to control their minds, emotions, and body. Applying these habits has been so beneficial that organizations like 4-H have begun to use them for stress management, relationship building, and leadership (Thompson, n.d.). Furthermore, researchers highlight the importance of leaders' ability to regulate negative emotions and that leaders need capabilities to manage stress and to lead themselves and others effectively (Rupprecht et al., 2019; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). Also, according to Sampl et al. (2017) a mindfulness-based leadership training has been effective in improving self-leadership. Although mindfulness is a new concept for many students, this type of training may be uniquely positioned to provide leaders with tools to engage in continued self-development to gain self-awareness and manage their emotions effectively (Rupprecht et al., 2019).

How it Works

The CAS Leadership Academy facilitated the two-hour training during the fall of 2019. The activity was led by a yogi and expert of mindfulness and well-being and consisted of six phases. In *Phase 1- Body Scan*, students were asked to control their breathing by counting up to six while inhaling and then exhaling. This technique helps to soothe the limbic system and calm the body and mind. During *Phase 2- Energy Check-In*, the instructor graphed the following quadrants: *elevated, diminished, pleasant, and unpleasant* on a flip chart, which helped students become familiar with their emotions. Students replicated the graph in their notes and placed a point on the quadrant that described their status at that time. To know how far they could move on the graphic, there was a scale of sensations. Accordingly, *Phase 3- Scale of Sensation*, introduced the concept of measuring stress in a range of one to ten, emphasizing that a healthy personal growth occurs between five to seven. To represent this explanation, students held their arm in front of them and pressed their hand toward their body to feel a stretch

(sustainable), and if they push a bit more, they experienced discomfort (unsustainable). The instructor described that leadership can mean pressing outside our comfort zone (eight or above). In *Phase 4- Yoga Section*, the instructor presented a person inside a circle that represented a “comfort diagram,” explaining that in the circle are the things with which we are comfortable. However, for there to be change and growth, we have to push against that circle in a sustainable way. In *Phase 5- Tendencies/Hindrances*, the instructor explained five tendencies related to resistance that prevent us from doing hard work including torpor-inaction, restlessness-unproductive activity, desire-soothe, aversion-push back, and doubt-questioning value. These tendencies can be responsible for decreased motivation, avoiding having difficult conversations, and not facing challenges head-on. The students learned that if they push too hard it can be harmful and create obstacles in their work as leaders. In the last step, *Phase 6- Wrap Up*, students revisited their energy check-in graph from *Phase 2*, and placed a point in the quadrant that described their state after this Yoga and Mindfulness session.

Results to Date

This seminar was purposefully designed to take place during midterms when students are stressed out and often skip seminar. The week prior to this activity, we did not tell the students what they would do next week. Our only instruction was to wear comfortable clothes and meet in a different room. As instructors, we wanted built in a sense of mystery so that students would get excited about the upcoming seminar, and wouldn't skip it once they learned we would be doing yoga. This results in 50 of the 53 students in attendance. During the workshop, students remained participatory, took notes without being asked and wanted us to repeat the activity. In an end-of-term reflection, students had good things to say about the workshop. Some of their comments were: "I learned how great it is to take a break and meditate to collect my thoughts, clear my mind, and reset my focus" and "Made me feel relaxed and I have taken her advice to do stretch in the morning to help with my day."

Future Plans

The Leadership Academy of OSU plans to replicate this activity, making sure to remind students to wear sportswear, bring yoga mats and a writing utensil. For future replications of this activity, we will consider a larger room, provide water and snacks, and rent/borrow yoga mats for students who don't own one. To replicate this activity, we recommend using a place with dim lights so that students can perform yoga poses comfortably. Also, it is important to reiterate that students should engage at a level that is comfortable for them. Regarding the instructor, we advise communicating the group's demographics and dynamics with him/her in advance so that the necessary accommodations can be made. We also recommend making sure the instructor has a high-quality microphone.

Costs

The expenses incurred were for the hiring of the instructor and for the room where the activity was carried out. The cost of the instructor for two hours was \$400, and the cost of the room was \$50. In addition to the monetary investment, we spent a total of four hours in meetings coordinating the activity with the instructor.

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