Exploring the Impact of Mindfulness on Leadership:

A Dialogue between Perspectives

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Isabelle Phillips, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Business at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis was to explore the experience of a group of leaders in a mindful leadership program. In depth engagement with two contemporary leadership theories found important connections to mindfulness concepts: specifically, spiritual leadership and socially constructed relational leadership. Mindfulness: a deliberate practice of placing attention on awareness itself, with an attitude of acceptance, is connected in literature with the foundational assumptions of these leadership theories. Spiritual leadership calls for mindfulness training as an inner life reflexive practice for leaders. Concurrently, socially constructed relational leadership theorists claim leaders need reflexive practices such as mindfulness that deliver fundamental realisations on leadership as emergent, intersubjective and context laden. The practice of mindfulness boasts substantial uptake in organisational life, globally, including at the level of leadership despite little to no extant empirical research.

Methodologically, this interdisciplinary research employs a qualitative design informed by critical realism. A qualitative case study was employed in the form of a ten-week mindful leadership program with 12 participants who identify as senior leaders and represent a range of industry sectors. The participants practised mindfulness together and at home. The group came together for ten two-hour sessions to discuss their experiences with mindfulness and leadership. This spoken word dialogue was transcribed by a research assistant in the room. Additional data was collected, including researcher journals, post-executive coaching interview responses, in-program artefacts and completion survey.

The study follows the journey arc of the group as a whole, using sensemaking as a theoretical frame. Findings show that the group normalised discussions of attentional awareness, shared ontological insights, and invited open-mindedness to the socially constructed, relational nature of leadership. The study also follows the journey arc of individuals. Findings show that four subsets of mindful leaders emerged at the interpretation stage of sensemaking. These have been named crusaders, advocates, cynics, and curious. An in-depth analysis of the subjective experience of the 'curious' subset who practiced mindfulness outlines their subjective experience of changes, as storied by them, and demonstrates the new discussions on reality

that were brought to the group as a whole by this subset. Implications of these findings are relevant for theory and praxis as mindful leadership practice is shown to meet the goals of spiritual and socially constructed relational leadership at group and individual levels, offering a bridge from theory to practice.

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Key Terms

The following definitions are specified for the purpose of this study and are not intended to denote a universally agreed-upon terminology. The choice of definitions is critically examined and justified in the literature review section of this thesis.

Coaching: formal workplace conversations abiding by the International Coach Federation guidelines (Directors June 2015.) that occur in confidence with the express purpose of supporting leaders in both wellness and performance.

Direct reports: defined as executives who are knowledge workers (professionals or semi-professionals) and who report directly to the leader cohort mentioned above.

Leaders: high-status individuals who are seen to stand above and apart from those whom others seek to gain favour from and those to whom we attribute great outcomes (Alvesson & Spicer 2012; Lichtenstein et al. 2006; Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich 1985; Pfeffer 1977). For the purposes of this study, leaders are defined as individuals with 'hire and fire' power conferred by organisational systems and structures and charged with the responsibility to influence the wellness and performance of other individuals and groups within an organisation.

Leadership: a shared sense-making process that occurs between leader and follower. Both are viewed as relational beings. Both are viewed in the broader context of the organisational setting (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien 2012; Lichtenstein et al. 2006; Uhl-Bien 2006; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey 2007).

Leadership Participant: refers to one of thirteen corporate executives who took part in this case-study research. They understand themselves to be leaders (see definition above), who are tasked with the responsibility of influencing others to achieve outcomes and who share the context of typical leadership pressures typically found in contemporary organisations.

Mindfulness: mindfulness, with its derivation in early Eastern philosophy, refers to 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally' (Kabat-Zinn 1994, p. 4)

Somatics Practices: refers to bodywork and movement studies that emphasise internal physical perception and experience, support the development of emotional intelligence aspects, such as perception of self and others, and connect practitioners to the present moment via awareness of arising phenomena in the field of the senses. As such, it can be seen as an avenue to mindfulness.