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# **Leading Mindfully: How to focus on what matters, influence for good and enjoy leadership more**

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Presentation by

**Professor Amanda Sinclair**

Professorial Fellow, Melbourne Business School; author; visionary;  
leadership guru

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## **About the presentation:**

In a world where we regularly feel captured by a never-ending “to do” list, expanding demands and depleted energies, leadership expert Amanda Sinclair has found a way to block out the noise.

Amanda has brought together the latest neuro-scientific and leadership research with understandings of modern and traditional meditation and mindfulness to create a suite of practices designed to help us find time for the people and purposes that matter to us most. If you’re working to create stronger communities, there’s no time to waste.

## **Amanda Sinclair:**

It is wonderful to be here in this amazing group of community leaders, and I hope that some of the work that I'll be exploring with you today is very useful in your leadership work.

So how do we do leadership, in all of the roles that you're doing it, in ways that enable, inspire and free the people that we're seeking to support? How do we do that kind of leadership without doing damage to ourselves – through long working hours, through very demanding situations, through endless to-do lists? How do we do that kind of leadership? Even more, how do we take pleasure and delight from the work that we do in our leadership roles?

These are questions that I've been exploring for much of my career as an academic, as a researcher, and I'd like to share some of those experiences with you today. I've got some answers if you like, or some ideas, and many of these ideas revolve around the application of mindfulness in leadership. I'd like to share some stories with you about how some of the groups of leaders that I've worked with have actually found these sets of ideas and practices.

I need to also add that for me personally it's not just a research journey or a journey with groups of leaders, those ideas have been very nourishing and helpful for me; so I hope they are for you.

Just a couple of quick things, firstly about mindfulness. This is a word that's got a lot of hype around it, but it's really a very simple, enduring idea. Mindfulness is the choice we make to be present here now – to bring our whole self, our thoughts and our bodies to this room, to this moment, to this group of people is what mindfulness is about.



Of course, often when we're in situations like this our thoughts are somewhere else, and so when we're seeking to be mindful in leadership we're seeking to bring our attention, our focus, our awareness to the people we're with at that moment; and this is one of the reasons why mindfulness is so impactful, potentially, in leadership.

Where meditation is typically a practice where we take ourselves offline to sit in stillness, in mindfulness we can bring it in to all of the conversations that we're having right now, to the interactions, to the meetings, to the work we're doing in the moment. Mindfulness is suitable for that.

So let me ask you, where's your mind now? Where's your mind now?

**Audience member:**

Here.

**Amanda Sinclair:**

Great. Well done. So what's probably worth mentioning is that for many of us at that moment, our mind actually was, you know, it might have been back with breakfast, it might have been something we'd forgotten to do before we left this morning, it might be something that's weighing on us that's waiting for us back at our desk or at the office. What's important is not the thought or being somewhere else, but the persistent and patient effort to bring our attention back to the now.



There's lots of neuroscience and lots of scientific evidence that's been emerging over the past 15 years or so that helps us understand exactly why this capacity is so useful for us, and it's useful for us at many levels, right down to the work that Australian scientist Elizabeth Blackburn was given a Nobel prize for, and that's at the level of DNA and our genetic structures. Her research shows that the capacity to keep on bringing our attention back to the present actually improves our DNA structures.

There was a very interesting study, I won't talk much about the research today because I want to make this a more experiential session with you, but there was a very interesting study done at Harvard University whereby they gave a whole lot of people some mobile phones, and they sort of alarmed them at all different times throughout the day; it was a big study. What they found was that about 70% of the time people's mind and their body were in two different places – their mind wasn't where their body was. But what the research also showed was that people were happiest and most fulfilled when their mind and their body were in the same place. So there's some more evidence about the value of mindfulness.

Just a quick word about leadership. When I'm talking about leadership I am of course not talking about the position or the rank in a formal kind of structure, I'm interested in the leadership that we all do by way of influencing others towards valuable outcomes. In my own research I've certainly been most inspired by the leadership done by musicians, just as we've seen in this previous moment.



I've been most inspired by the leadership work that's often not given that label, all of the work that you do that may not be seen or given that label of leadership, indeed you may not give it that label, but in very powerful ways it certainly satisfies that notion of influencing others towards mutually valued outcomes.

Let me just take you back for a moment to 2003. I'd been made a professor some years before this, and on the outside I looked a success, doing all the things that a professor does, teaching and researching, and going to endless university meetings. Inside, though, was a profound sense of unhappiness, a feeling that I'd lost connection with the values that I believed were important about education. I found myself caught up, very busy. Incredibly busy. Lots of emails, lots of meetings. But really there was a sense that I was failing in leadership myself. I was just going through the motions.

There were two particular behaviours that I noticed about myself that were part of this time. The first was a process of deferring life. I'd hear myself say things like, "Oh, I'll just get to summer holidays and then I'll catch up with some friends, then I'll start enjoying myself." "I'll just get through these next six months." "I'll just get through these next two weeks." "I'll just get through..." I'd hear myself saying this, and then summer holidays would come around and what do you think was going on? It was just more of the same, so in a sense I had this feeling that I was indefinitely postponing the possibilities of contentment and peace, and a sense of satisfaction in life. So that was one thing.



Here's an example of the other thing that was going on. I have four kids, and Charlie, who's a bit older now but at that stage was at school, he'd be sitting at the kitchen bench and I'd be making dinner, and he'd be telling me about something that he was doing in school, he's a musician, interested in maths, gorgeous kid. He'd be talking to me about something and I wouldn't be there. I'd find myself somewhere else, I'd be thinking about the email that I hadn't sent, or the phone call I hadn't got to, or a meeting that was coming up.

So it was these two habits that I started noticing were really pervasive in my daily actions, and it just wasn't working. So I walked into my Dean's office and I said, "Look, this is not working out for me, I'm going to resign." And he said, "Don't do that, Amanda, let's work out something else." He suggested that I take a year's leave without pay; and I did that, and spent a year returning to finish off some yoga teacher training that I'd started some years before.

I had this absolutely blissful year, and I can recommend it for any of you, immersing myself in a lot of Eastern philosophy, a lot of Buddhist philosophy and meditation and so on. Having a wonderful time. At the end of this year I came back and I had yoga teacher *here*, business school professor *here*. Which one do you think looked more attractive? Definitely the yoga teaching.

But of course we had to live and we're dependent on my income of course; and the other thing that I realised is that there are many fantastic yoga teachers out there, fantastic. The thing that I could do would be to bring the most powerful and profound insights from that experience that I'd had into the heart of the work that I was doing with leaders and in leadership.



I need to tell you that many disasters followed – walking into a room of senior executives and inviting them to, “Breathe, breathe.” They didn't like it. It's interesting for me to think about why they didn't like it. One of them made it very clear, he said, “I already breathe, I'm not paying all this money to be told to breathe.” But I think at another level being invited to slow down and notice the breath is potentially very confronting for those of us who are running really fast through life, running on the fast track. It's a very confronting thing to be invited to pause and slow down.

The upshot of all this was that I did want to be in the space of being a leadership teacher and a supporter of others. I wanted to be in that space completely differently after this experience. I wanted to take off my armour, and I was aware of how much armour I'd been carrying. I wanted to work not just with my head but with my heart; I wanted to be present in my whole self with the groups that I worked with; and I wanted to support the people that I taught and interacted with to find the path to leadership that was more satisfying, more nourishing, less punishing. That's what led me into this work around mindfulness.

I'd like to just talk about a couple of practice that I'm hoping might be useful for you to think about. The first of these is that notion of leadership as *being* as well as *doing*. What I want to suggest is that more important than what you do, or what you say, might be *who and how you're being*. It might be the quality of your being that actually acts as a support or an inspiration to others rather than what you do or what you say.





This is this idea that leadership might be about what happens *through* you, not *by* you, the notion of helping leaders see that their value might lie not just in *what they do* but in *how they're being* is part of this idea.

Let me just put a couple of ideas around this on the whiteboard, I know this is old-fashioned technology but I quite like it. So if we think about traditional leadership as about the doing, about action, about talking and telling, directing, and about striving to future goals; and if we think about it, this is sort of the look of traditional notions of leadership.

If we think about, in contrast, leading mindfully, we're inviting a shift from the doing to the being. We're inviting a shift from action to stillness; from talking and telling to deep, generous listening. The evidence is that that kind of listening changes what's possible for the speaker without us actually saying anything. Finally, there's the shift from striving to future goals to valuing the present moment – putting a value on this moment, this one right now.

So what do you think was the reaction of some of my MBA students when I suggested this shift, what do you think they thought?

**Audience member:**

They'd think it was crazy.

**Amanda Sinclair:**

Yes, exactly. That's exactly the response. They tell me that it's on this side, this left (traditional leadership) side, this is where their KPIs are, this is where all their performance goals are, they're all on this side.





They say, “How can I let go of this?” What I want to suggest to you, though, is that we get really caught up on this side, and finding ways to move across to this (mindful leadership) side actually enables us to do this a whole lot better, with a whole lot more focus and clarity and purpose.

Of course, they're not mutually exclusive, but part of what I'm suggesting to you with this notion is that making a shift across to the being at certain times, in certain situations, might be very helpful in leadership.

I want to give you the example that comes from some of my work with doctors and specialists. I've done quite a lot of work with hospital executive teams and specialists and so on, and they're a fantastically interesting group to work with, they're very demanding, especially the psychiatrists. But one of the things that's very powerful is that they've been taught and they think of their value in the doing, and of course we want medical people to be good at the doing. But increasingly so many of them in their roles are required to do leadership; that is, they're required to mentor junior doctors, they're required to lobby upwards for certain sorts of resources, they're required to affiliate and support their patients, which requires leadership as well as the technical skills. Helping them see that they have more to offer than their doing is a very powerful thing.

I was teaching a group of specialists, just as an example, and I spent a day with them and was introducing some of these ideas, and this one woman came up to me at the end, a senior specialist, and she kind of eyeballed me, and she'd been a rather challenging member of the audience and I thought, “Uh-oh, what's coming?”



And she said to me, “This is essential to me surviving. Doing more of this is what will keep me alive.” What she's getting at with that is that under so much pressure, finding a way of moving across to the right-hand side is the thing that's going to enable her to trust herself, to slow down, to offer more of what she's got available, it's all part of helping her survive.

So that's one core idea, the shifting to the being as well as the doing, and of course this is going to look different for all of us, it's going to be a different bundle of habits and ways of centring ourselves. It might be simply going round and seeing somebody instead of sending them an email. It might be really bringing our attention fully to an important meeting rather than feeling as though it's only getting half of our attention or less. Certainly in the doctors' case, they are ineffective if they stay in their head, they've got to bring some of this, some of their heart, as part of their work to be effective in the leadership space.

The second idea I wanted to share with you that comes also from mindfulness is around stress and how we react to challenge and threat. I know there's a lot of you working in the health sector here so many of you will know this literature very well. The thing that's been emerging over the past few years in terms of research is that the debilitating consequences of stress – that is, the psychological and physiological debilitating symptoms – are not caused by the events that happen to us, but by our thoughts and our ways of thinking about those events.

This research recognises that terrible things happen in our lives, difficult things, we lose people, families break down, we have really big things that happen in our lives.



But what this research is consistently now showing is that our response to those events, and the consequences on us, psychologically, emotionally, physically, are determined not by the events but our thinking about those events. So what the mindfulness research helps us to do is to notice our patterns of thinking about those events.

Again, I want to do something over here on the white board. If we think of this vertical as a level of challenge or our alertness, we know from a lot of work now that in order to get our performance up we do need a sense of challenge, we need some demanding circumstances, we need some things that require our abilities and our concentration and focus, and that leads up to performance. But what we also know is that if we stay up there, the curve sort of looks like this – it goes: fatigue; illness; exhaustion; and then break down.

So if we stay up here in a physical state of high alertness, a lot of adrenalin pumping around, quite a lot of cortisol and so on, it eventually leads to breakdown.

What the mindfulness research also tells us is that we need to work out ways of going up and coming down – going up when we need to and coming down. Unfortunately a lot of us start to get hooked on being up here. But it's really valuable to work out how to bring yourself down off that stage of high alert, and one of the very clear pieces of evidence from the mindfulness research is that it's our bodies and our breath that are the gateways to coming down.

One of the many misconceptions about mindfulness is that it's all about what happens up here. Actually the gateway to getting present is our bodies, and of course all of you will know that.



If you think about what helps you come down off that curve, it's probably got something to do with your breath and your body and your senses. It's going for a walk, it's getting on a bike, its being out in nature. In my case it's mucking around in my compost bin and talking to my chooks, they've got a lot of wisdom, especially one of them.

So it's important, really, for us to not just tune in to these processes but to help others, to notice when others are up here. I've worked with many executive teams that spend their lives up here, in a state of hypervigilance constantly, and it's really bad for us. So that's the second idea – around observing and moderating our response to challenge and demands.

The third idea is to pick up something that I mentioned earlier around deep, generous listening. My colleagues and I have done quite a lot of work looking at what we call *listening from stillness*, or mindful listening. The evidence is that this is a really powerful practice to share and to experiment with; and I'm going to get you to do it in a moment.

You probably know that there's a lot of interesting work around mindfulness going on in schools, a lot of schools now have programs where they teach children to relax and to be mindful, they're using apps and gathering all sorts of terrific data about it. My role is often to go in and work with executive teams or staff around mindfulness, and believe me they need it more, they need it just as much as the kids, but of course, often, they don't get it.

One of the really impactful things to do with these teachers is to help them experiment with a different form of listening.



Teachers operate in very demanding environments – they’re very tightly time-structured environments, they get kids coming up to them all the time, knocking at the door, "Can I talk to you miss?", and they immediately go into problem-solving mode. Helping them experiment with a different form of listening helps them to notice their usual habits, and to experiment with something different. I mean, all of us know, all teachers know, that it's the solution that the child comes up with for themselves to their problem that's the important one. If the teacher just says, “Do this; try this” it's not going to be sustained, it's not going to last. The much better option is to try and help that young person come up with their own way forward. So that's what some different practices of listening can do at schools.

Just one other context before I get us working on this. I was working, again, with a big group of public health people a year or so ago, and we did some work around mindful listening, and one of them came up to me at the end of the session and she said, “Look, I'm an emergency doctor.” I think she worked at the Alfred or the Austin, one of the really big public hospitals, so she's seen people come in, literally life and death, literally life and death, one after another. And she said, “It's so interesting what you do.” She said, “One of the things that I've noticed as an emergency doctor is that the one thing people in that emergency room want, if they are conscious, is for you to listen to them.” The temptation for those doctors is to slap on all the equipment, but what people need and want at that most critical moment is for somebody to give their whole attention to that person.



So I'm going to invite you to work in pairs in a moment, so you might want to team up with somebody, and it needs to be a pair so for those of you are sort of sitting on the edges, can you find somebody just to work with for the next little while?

**[Delegates undertake practical mindful listening exercise]**

What you've identified so powerfully is something that, well, there's several things in there that I want to just underline. One is that we think our value is in speaking, but your value in that example was in delivering your presence. It's rare, we don't get it much, so it's a beautiful gift to give to someone, our still presence, a beautiful gift to give to somebody else and it doesn't take long. In fact, what you might find is that difficult conversations that you think are going to need a whole lot of time actually don't need much time at all. It's a fabulous thing. Part of it also is recognising that there may be a whole lot of value that we're currently not tapping into about ourselves, and about how we can help and support others, that is mobilised just through this process of being a still listener. So thank you very much for that, for participating in that so openly.

I want to finish with my fourth idea, and it's connected to what you've just done; and this is the idea of leading with less ego.

What do I mean with this? Mindfulness kind of helps, and certainly helped me a great deal, but we need to recognise that, to put it bluntly, the self is a bit of a fabrication. What do I mean by that? I mean that there's often a whole lot of things we sort of tell ourselves about ourselves, “I need this;” “I believe that;” “It's important for this to happen because this is important to me.”





Now, I'm not saying here that it's not important to believe strongly and advocate for things that are very important, but I am suggesting that sometimes in leadership it's really helpful to notice when your ego's getting very involved in a particular outcome. Most of us can pick that up.

I taught a group of judges last year, and it was a fabulous opportunity to work with a very intelligent bunch. I was introducing mindfulness to them, which was pretty revolutionary in some ways, and they were a fabulous group, but they were a difficult group, as you might imagine. I had quite a mixed experience with them. Anyway, I got the evaluations after the day, and they sat in my inbox for probably about five days, as you do when you're a bit worried about the feedback you're going to get. When I actually did get around to opening the evaluations, guess what, they offered very reasoned, careful feedback, which I largely agreed with. So I'd made this a snake, and my ego was overly involved in this.

So it's been a fantastically useful thing for me to recognise that when I sense that I'm spending a lot of energy kind of defending my identity, or my sense of myself, that I can just let that go, that I can move into what you might call a kind of bigger self; to see that in a situation like that, it is an opportunity to work with a fantastic group and that most of that group were genuinely open, which they were; to have compassion for them – gee that's a tough job, very tough job – but also for myself in that space, it's part of what helps me recognise that.





So this is the idea that it's possible to notice when we're occupying that ego space, there are clues that you'd be able to recognise: the same thoughts go round and round and round, they're very repetitive; it's often fairly judgmental, very judgmental, it's very self-judgmental; sometimes "catastrophising". So when we notice that that's going on there's always the possibility to make the choice to not expend any more energies in that circle of ego, but to step into a bigger space, and that bigger space is the bigger you, it's the you that's open, that listens, that's playful, that takes pleasure in interacting with others and supporting others. It's always possible to make that move, to catch yourself in that tight little loop where it's all about you and to move into this much more open and enabling kind of part of you.

So less ego leadership, I absolutely believe it's possible. Interestingly enough some of these ideas have been picked up by football teams. I found some commentary on British football that had picked up some of those terms, that set of ideas in my books, to explain the victory. Those of you who are into English Premier League will know the victors a couple of seasons back were Leicester City, at amazing odds, and what they were saying was that they were trying to work with less ego leadership in the team, less of a focus on the stars, less of a focus on winning, more of a focus on building the possibilities for all of the players to feel empowered and capable of being part of that team. So I think that there's lots of applications for this notion of less ego leadership.

Thank you very much.

ENDS

