

other aspects of their work life, which can lead to further improvements in employee health, well-being, and performance.

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## Using Mindfulness To Improve High Potential Development

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Hyland, Lee, and Mills (2015) have provided a thorough and much needed overview of the construct of mindfulness within the context of industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology and have offered several reasons why mindfulness programs should be considered in the workplace. In this commentary, we focus on their suggestion that mindfulness may improve the

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development of high potentials through enhanced self-awareness. We agree that mindfulness is likely an effective tool to help high potentials succeed in an increasingly complex world. We come to this conclusion after conducting a rigorous review of the literature and talking to experts (Ruderman, Clerkin, & Connolly, 2014), learning various forms of mindfulness including completing the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program, and our experiences conducting applied leadership research at the Center for Creative Leadership—a 45-year-old organization devoted exclusively to leadership development.

However, we are wary that mindfulness training may be perceived as a “magic bullet” that will solve the challenges of leadership development. In particular, we raise four questions that we believe must be addressed by future research in order to effectively integrate mindfulness into programmatic efforts for the development of high potential talent: (a) What methods or approaches based on mindfulness can enhance high potential development? (b) What underlying mechanisms facilitate the link between mindfulness and high potential development? (c) How do stakeholders view mindfulness? (d) What type of evidence of impact does the field need to better use applications based on mindfulness?

### **Methods and Approaches**

Research must further explore best practices for introducing mindfulness as a high potential developmental tool. Following Campbell and Smith (2014), we define a high potential as “an employee who is assessed as having the ability, organizational commitment, and motivation to rise to and succeed in more senior positions in the organization” (2014, p. 5). High potential leadership development programs typically contain a mixture of tools, experiences, and developmental relationships. Outside of official leadership development programs, high potential development also requires years of various experiences (both personal and work), support from others, education, and accountability. It is currently unclear how mindfulness should be inserted into such development trajectories in order to have the best impact. For instance, what contexts and settings are most compelling for introducing mindfulness to high potentials? Who should facilitate the mindfulness training? Does it matter whether it is taught by mindfulness experts? How much training is needed? What type of mindfulness training works best?

As noted by the focal article, much of the research on mindfulness to date has been based on the MBSR courses developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. These programs extend over 8-weeks and require daily practice and an intense commitment from participants. Although these are excellent programs, our own experience makes us question whether they are the right format for high potential development

programs. Organizations are often reluctant to dedicate time for leadership training and typically want a very clean link between the experience and business performance—something that standard MBSR programs do not provide. Indeed, Hyland et al. argue that the time demands of MBSR make it impractical in organizations.

Conversely, the focal article also notes that some mindfulness trainings offered by organizations are watered down. Similarly, Purser and Loy (2013) talk about the tendency toward “McMindfulness” in the organizational world—a simplified and commercialized version of the true practice that is so stripped of the essentials that it is worthless. Thus, we encourage future research to examine the question of “dosage” in the development of high potentials: How much mindfulness training is needed to produce and sustain desired effects?

### **Underlying Mechanisms**

Hyland et al. note that mindfulness may help develop high potentials through gaining self-awareness. However, the focal article also describes several broader underlying mechanisms that may be responsible for the positive effects of mindfulness, including neuroscience, well-being, and cognition. To develop a coherent and effective high potential development program, we need to better understand how and why mindfulness might be facilitating growth as a leader. For example, Lazar and colleagues (2005) found that 8-weeks of mindfulness training increased certain areas of the brain associated with learning, cognition, memory, emotional regulation, perspective taking, empathy, and compassion. If mindfulness increases leadership ability via boosting these areas of the brain, other neurological methods might be equally viable in facilitating high potentials. Similarly, Hyland et al. state that mindfulness enhances cognitive, psychological, and physiological functioning. If this is the case, can cognitive, psychological, and physiological well-being also be used to better understand high potential development? Others describe mindfulness as a metacognitive ability, suggesting that mindfulness allows one to view emotions and thoughts as “events in the mind, rather than as direct readouts on reality” (Teasdale, 1999, p. 147). This positions mindfulness as a cognitive skill that can enhance the ability to learn by reducing obstacles to thinking. McCall and McCauley (2014) argue that just giving high potentials learning experiences doesn’t guarantee that they will grow in capability. Perhaps the metacognition developed in mindfulness training can help high potentials better draw out the meaning from experiences.

Understanding which underlying mechanisms are facilitating leadership development is crucial in order to help determine the type of support needed to promote learning for high potentials. In addition, different contexts may

require activation of one mechanism or another in order to gain the desired results. Future research should examine which underlying mechanisms related to mindfulness are most helpful to leadership development—as well as whether neuroscience, well-being, and metacognition can facilitate positive results without the mindfulness component.

### **Stakeholder Readiness**

Our third question has to do with readiness of the leadership development field to accept mindfulness as a tool for high potential development. While mindfulness is becoming a well-known construct within psychological research, it is not yet universally understood and embraced by leadership development practitioners or human resource departments. Introducing mindfulness as a tool for leadership development depends heavily on the receptivity of those invested in talent management. A better understanding of stakeholder resistance is needed to address skepticism. For instance, language may be a barrier to mindfulness programs, as many people still associate mindfulness with its traditional Buddhist roots. In addition, critics may see mindfulness as an end in itself and not as a means to enhance performance. Increased education exchange about the relationship between mindfulness and performance is needed to introduce mindfulness into a high potential developmental context; such knowledge exchange involves dialogue between researchers, mindfulness practitioners, and leadership development specialists.

### **Evidence of Impact**

Finally, it is important to consider the type of evidence of impact needed to better understand high potential development applications based on mindfulness. Most of the studies reviewed by Hyland et al. have looked at the effects of mindfulness training on employees. This body of research is small and does not specifically focus on high potentials or leadership development. Without such data, it is less than clear how to implement mindfulness practices in leader development or even how to make the case for it. Before we endorse embedding mindfulness in leadership development programs, we need more empirical evidence of the efficacy of mindfulness within a leadership development context. For instance, does expertise in mindfulness predict future leadership performance? If so, what type of performance and in what type of situation? Does it work for everyone? Does it work for all types of leaders and all types of organizations?

### **Conclusion**

We believe that mindfulness could be very helpful in developing high potentials. However, we also believe that we do not yet have enough evidence

to understand how exactly mindfulness may facilitate the development of high potentials. We suggest four questions that should be addressed before the link between mindfulness and high potential development can be established.

Nonetheless, we feel that this work is right on track and urge I-O researchers and practitioners alike to experiment with methodologies for generating mindfulness. Our chaotic world would benefit from leaders with the ability to be mindful and objectively look at internal events and distinguish them from the physical and social worlds. Ultimately, we'd like to see an approach to high potential development where mindfulness is integrated with the conventional elements of high potential development such as coaching, assessment-for-development training, mentoring, action learning, journal writing, online learning, classroom learning, and assignment-driven learning. Mindfulness training is not a stand-alone approach to development, but we hypothesize that it could be quite valuable in combination with other modes of development. It is simple, but not easy. We believe that proper integration of mindfulness into the suite of high potential development activities could facilitate the development process. It is time to integrate these capacities with the understanding of personality characteristics and the building of behavioral competencies that have long been put into the practice of development and bring mindfulness into the leadership field. Doing so requires stimulating the dialogue between contemplative traditions, neuroscience, and I-O psychology.

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