Being, Knowing, and Doing

Sue Carter Kahl

University of San Diego

Introduction – What is your work?

It started with a question: What is your work? On the surface, that work was to explore the relationship between leadership and mindfulness for a course. On a deeper level, the work was to discover the connection for myself, discern my emerging place in the world and find integration between the seemingly disparate avenues to which I felt called.

Over the course of a semester, this inquiry took on a life of its own, fueled in part by a course in Action Research Methods. The work had a way of seeping into conversations with friends and colleagues, filling scores of journal pages, and adding a layer of depth to my professional work and personal reflection. It eventually evolved into a broader question exploring the connection between leadership, mindfulness, and inquiry.

For academic purposes, this paper begins to explore and answer the research question of how leadership, mindfulness, and inquiry intersect and influence each other. On a personal level, it is part of my work to find the connections between who I am, what I do, and how I know the world – in other words, my being, doing, and knowing.

Needs Statement

Leaders of all sizes and types of organizations, groups, and communities are experiencing a world that is very complicated. There is enormous capacity to address technical challenges or those that can solved through technical or routine know-how (Heifetz, 1994). However, Heifetz (1994) notes it is much more difficult to solve adaptive challenges: the ones that have not been solved before; that span boundaries of values, beliefs, and assumptions along with technical expertise; and that require change, or adaptation, on the part of stakeholders. Yet, the world's growing complexity requires an increased need for the capacity to address adaptive challenges and the change that accompanies them (Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

Leadership, then, is a process of moving people through change, in partnership with them. Effective leaders engage groups in the work of identifying where they are and where they want to be and making the necessary adaptations to get there. It is asking a lot. At the individual level, the brain is hardwired to maintain equilibrium and to take shortcuts for learning (De Neys, Vartanian, & Goel, 2008), which means humans default to what they already know and attempt to assimilate new information into current mental models. In short, people look for evidence to validate what they know and filter out information that challenges current beliefs (De Neys, Vartanian, & Goel).

This same commitment to maintaining equilibrium plays out within groups of people as culture. Organizational culture evolves from practices that have helped a group adapt to internal and external challenges (Schein, 2010). Over time, these practices become the norm and remain in place even though the organizational climate changes (Schein). Schein (2010) notes that the organization's culture offers a sense of stability and that it becomes easier for group members to distort new data than to alter their beliefs. Attempting to change a group's culture or an individual's mental models creates anxiety as it challenges individuals' stability and competence in knowing how to get things done (Heifetz, 1994).

Thus, individuals and groups are resistant to change by nature and practice, defaulting to what they already know and do. Moving beyond what is already known then, requires not only change, but learning. This learning needs to address the transformation of ideas and behavior. Therefore, behavioral models that emphasize acquiring facts and figures and developing a body of knowledge consisting of fixed ideas (Kolb, 1984) are not a good fit for informing adaptive change. Instead, this type of model is suitable for technical challenges and know-how.

As an alternative, Kolb (1984) offers experiential learning theory (ELT). ELT frames learning as an integrated and ongoing process that includes cycles of concrete experience, reflection and observation, abstract theorizing, and testing implications within a real-world context (Kolb, 1984). The learner is in an active position, working to resolve tensions inherent in the learning process (Kolb). These tensions could be old and new ways of doing things or the pull between action and reflection or concrete experience and abstract theorizing. Thus, ELT is well aligned to adaptive challenges.

Integration

Leaders, or those trying to effect change, have a tall order. They need technical skills and knowledge. They need to observe and diagnose what is happening, and then engage with other people to identify and reconcile competing values and commitments (Heifetz, 1994; Kolb, 1984). In short, they need to make positive change happen. In the meantime, they have to hold and manage the anxiety of the group while somehow managing their own emotions (Heifetz). And they need to be able to do all of these things within a culture that values fast and measurable outcomes and wears its busy-ness like a badge of honor (Ruffing, 1995).

How does a leader maintain, let alone, sustain herself?

Any one theory or model alone seems to fall short of meeting the complexity, nuance, and dynamic nature of current challenges. Instead, a multidisciplinary system of theories or approaches may be better suited to meet these bundled and entwined challenges. Leaders need to act with effectiveness, understand the environment and context with clarity, and sustain themselves with purpose. In other words, current challenges require a holistic and integrated approach of doing, knowing, and being.

Overview of Constructs

The elements of doing, knowing, and being connect to leadership, inquiry, and mindfulness. This section provides a brief definition, overview, and theory or framework for each.

Leadership

Leadership is a dynamic and nuanced topic addressed in many theories but lacking an overarching theory that connects them all (Wren, 2007). Fry and Kriger (2009) note that most theories define leadership in terms of doing (behaviors, actions) or having (traits, skills), but rarely in terms of being. More recent attempts at leadership theory development have begun to incorporate less tangible aspects of the construct such as authenticity and transformation (Fry & Kriger, 2009). Yet, a leadership theory that is holistic, generalizable, and empirically based continues to elude the field (Wren).

In absence of a unifying theory of leadership, the next best approach is to select a theory based on fit. Thus, the adaptive leadership framework by Heifetz (1994) is used in this paper. This model frames leadership as a process or activity, rather than a role or position (Heifetz, 1994). As such, the function of leaders is to diagnose a challenge and determine its nature as technical or adaptive, engage an organization or community in the work, manage distress levels, and maintain focus on key issues rather than distractions (Heifetz). Although this framework lacks empirical evidence, it offers a holistic approach to leadership that accounts for the leader, followers or stakeholders, values, and interactions between them. It does not provide cure-all prescriptions. Rather, it serves as a framework that can be applied in complex and often changing environments to assess a situation and act effectively, regardless of one's formal

authority. Those acting in a leadership capacity – or doing - are referred to as leaders or practitioners in this paper.

Mindfulness

In contrast to doing, mindfulness offers an alternative of non-doing or being (Kabat-Zinn, 2012). Mindfulness is often associated with Buddhist or other faith traditions, but it can be practiced without any spiritual underpinnings (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Researchers have found that mindfulness offers many benefits such as improved psychological functioning (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011), physical health, and emotional regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). What is less clear is which specific aspects of mindfulness practices and training methods matter most, in what combination, and at what duration to realize benefits (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). Thus, like leadership, there is not a grand theory of mindfulness. Instead, there are a variety of definitions and practices that are associated with mindfulness.

A popular definition of mindfulness is paying attention "on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4). The purpose of mindfulness is to cultivate an ability to be present to what is going on at any given moment and to engage with reality as it is (Chodron, 2001; Kabat-Zinn). It helps unbundle the thoughts, feelings, expectations, and opinions that often accompany an event or encounter (Kabat-Zinn). As such, it is a good fit as a tool for engaging with increasingly entwined and complex challenges.

Meditation often is associated with mindfulness. Indeed, meditation practices such as sitting, breathing, walking or visualization support mindful behavior and tend to enhance one's ability to practice mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). However, no special conditions are required for mindfulness; it can be practiced by anyone in any moment and situation. Those acting from a place of mindfulness – or being – are referred to as contemplatives in this paper.

Inquiry

Lastly, inquiry is offered as a link for mindfulness and leadership in the form of knowing. Inquiry is the process of seeking truth, information, or knowledge (inquiry, n.d.). Positivists approach inquiry as a search for an objective truth or reality that they believe can be discovered by examining a subject's individual elements while controlling for researcher bias (Creswell, 2014). Postmodernists, by contrast, hold a more holistic and socially-constructed view of truth or reality, and suggest that neither researcher bias, nor power or political forces, can ever truly be controlled (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). They therefore attempt to make their values and biases explicit. Ultimately, the selection of an approach depends on one's assumptions about the nature of being and knowledge along with the research questions one is trying to answer (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998).

Moreover, inquiry, or method, selection also may be informed by the research purpose. For example, genome sequencing, which requires an understanding of individual aspects of DNA, would be served best by empirical methods. However, action research is a more suitable methodology for those wanting to determine practical implications and recommendations for the workplace (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

The purpose of action research is to create knowledge that informs and effects change in real-world situations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). It provides a framework for systematic observation that includes repeated cycles of planning, observation, action, and reflection. It is the focal point for inquiry because of its grounding in practical application. Those who participate in action research – or knowing - are referred to as researchers or scholars in this paper.

In summary, leadership, mindfulness, and inquiry offer the prospect of a networked approach to the complex challenges of the modern world. In particular, adaptive leadership, action research, and paying attention nonjudgmentally link to provide a new system for doing, knowing, and being. This system integrates leader and practitioner expertise about effecting change, scholar and action researcher understanding about knowing and learning, and contemplative knowledge about meaning and being.

Toward a Holistic Approach to Doing, Knowing, and Being

Adaptive leadership includes a number of recommendations about how to effectively exercise leadership. According to Heifetz (1994), adaptive leaders need to identify and diagnose challenges in light of values, manage distress at an acceptable level, emphasize key issues rather than anxiety-reducing distractions, and engage the community in the work. Heifetz also offers suggestions for how leaders can sustain themselves: acting in the present while being aware of broader group dynamics, distinguishing self from role, listening to self and others, and maintaining a sense of purpose. These methods offer a strong foundation for leadership that can be further strengthened with strategies not always found in leadership development.

As such, it is helpful to borrow complementary methods from other disciplines. Action research provides such methods. It weds systematic observation and curiosity to understand what is happening in a situation or organization (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011), thus supporting assessment and diagnosing of challenges. The action research cycle holds many similarities with Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), positioning it as a good way to repeatedly plan, act, and reflect on the process of learning and change.

ELT also aligns with the adaptive leadership model. They both share a holistic orientation that is connected to community, viewed as process, and grounded in experience or

action (Kolb, 1984). The models emphasize that adaptation or change occurs over time as a group resolves tensions between its values or observations and actions (Heifetz, 1994; Kolb). This is a good fit for action researchers who probe to discover the underlying personal and community values and political dynamics that are at work (McNiff & Whitehead). Moreover, they welcome community as critical participants in the process, helping to do everything from identifying the issues and collecting and analyzing data to reflecting on where data, values, and next steps intersect (McNiff & Whitehead). In this way, the leader also takes on the role of researcher (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998).

This give and take between leaderly action and scholarly reflection may seem sufficient to make well-informed and effective decisions. However, relying too heavily on thinking may inhibit adaptation (Fry & Kriger, 2009). In addition, emphasizing only doing and knowing proves to be draining, further contributing to the collective exhaustion that seems to permeate professions of all types (Ruffing, 1995). Moreover, knowing and doing require working with values, but do not identify the source of those values.

Therefore, mindfulness is a useful addition that can transform knowing and doing. Often, knowing and doing are associated with a critical eye that is looking for what went wrong or what did not align with intentions or plans. Mindfulness offers an alternative method of observation that removes the judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). The contemplative merely notices and acknowledges what is happening – internally or externally. With practice, mindfulness helps to untangle the elements that the brain packages for efficiency's sake, and it is easier to see individual thoughts, emotions, or physical stimuli (Brown, 2011). This promotes the ability to be sensitive to environmental cues that can provide insight into a group's dynamics and needs (Fry & Kriger, 2009) and the distinction between a leader's role and his self (Kabat-Zinn, 2012).

These cues also help inform a leader about when a response is connected to an emotional reaction, thereby helping her regulate responses or at least see a choice is possible (Brown, 2011).

Additionally, mindfulness is a practice for dealing with reality as it is rather than as a social construct that is laden with meanings and narrative (Chodron, 2001). This seemingly spiritual practice is consistent with research findings that effective leaders "confront the brutal facts" (Collins, 2001, p. 65). Although meaning making is an important feature of leadership (Schein, 2010), assigning meaning that is not consistent with reality or the full range of possible explanations leads to fewer good decisions (Collins).

In addition, mindfulness is a resource for creating the container or holding environment that Heifetz (1994) notes groups need. He points to the ambiguity that arises from complex issues that lack existing solutions, and the tension and paradox present in the often competing values of stakeholders. The process of changes adds further distress that leaders must manage creating another level of difficulty to leading (Heifetz, 1994). Mindfulness does not remove these challenges, but helps leaders pace their reactions and responses (Brown, 2011). Doing so improves their capacity to hold paradox and ambiguity more productively and view tension as a resource to be engaged (Brown).

Finally, at a more spiritual level, mindfulness creates a space to find one's center or sense of grounding (Grace, 2011). Palmer states that "we teach who we are" (1997, p. 14), a view echoed by others as an admonition that those who hope to lead, teach, or support others cannot do so without transmitting their own pain or lack of wholeness (Grace, 2011; Rohr, 2013). In other words, doing good outer work requires attending to one's inner work (Grace, 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Mindfulness supports the conditions for effective inner work: noticing

without judgment, paying attention on purpose, cultivating stillness, and being present from moment to moment to moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). As a result, it supports the outer work of inquiry and leadership.

To summarize, mindfulness helps individuals see and be present to reality and to attend to their being. Inquiry helps link mindfulness with leadership by providing space to explore what is seen to more effectively and sustainably lead. Leadership includes the experimentation and action that follow from knowing and is grounded in being. Conversely, the lessons learned from action can be more fully investigated through inquiry to further refine one's being. This summary presents the process as a linear and two-way path. However, the path, if there is one, is likely to be more fluid than this summary suggests, with being, knowing, and doing flowing simultaneously and informing each other. As Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 11) submit, "All ways of knowing serve to support our skillful being-in-the-world from moment-to-moment-to-moment, our ability to act intelligently in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes." Indeed, the complexity, need, and yearning of the world call for a more holistic and integrated approach to doing, knowing, and being.

Reflections on Implications

What is our work? - Future Research

My research to find the intersection and influence between leadership, inquiry, mindfulness has taken on a life of its own, and yet, it feels like I have only started planting seeds. One of the key areas for additional research is to further explore what connective tissue exists between adaptive leadership, change management, organizational development, organizational culture, learning theory, emotional intelligence, and action research. To be sure, there is significant overlap between these areas, yet there does not seem to be an explicit discussion

about these intersections and how they inform our understanding of effective leading, knowing, and being. Kegan and Lahey (2009) indicate that the world's complexity is accelerating at a pace that exceeds our adaptive leadership capacity. We need effective tools that likely come from a broad and diverse array of sources, disciplines, and methodologies.

In addition, there is an opportunity to include more work in Heifetz's holding environment. There is plenty of anxiety, tension, and distress that are outcomes of change and adaptation. But change is a constant, so what can we do on a proactive and ongoing basis in our organizations and communities to help us feel equipped for change? How do we create a holding environment that helps create conditions that make adaptation less painful? Fostering a spirit of inquiry and curiosity seems to be a good first step that can be further enhanced by practicing mindfulness. What practical ways can we implement this kind of work?

Stewarding a more expansive holding environment seems fundamentally linked to community. Increasingly, leadership is done *with* rather than *to* other group members. Fortunately, community is a common thread among adaptive leadership, action research, and mindfulness. However, our idolization of outlier leaders from technology gurus to CNN Heroes does more to cement the idea of leadership as a great man or role than an activity. On the other hand, many of the emerging movements born from social media have plenty of activity without lasting or meaningful change that leaders are needed to bring about.

Finally, we need to reframe what matters. Words like reflection, community or team building, culture, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence all land in the soft skills family. They suffer from a reputation that is a shadow of their hard skills brethren. Yet, these skills are increasingly lauded as the very ones that separate effective leaders, at any level, from the less

effective ones. At what point do we redefine and then reward skills in a way that more adequately represents their contribution to our work?

What is our work? - Personal and Professional Practice

One of the most valuable outcomes of LEAD 579 was finding integration between my professional work, academic work, and way of being in the world. I came to value my learning and research more and trust that it was preparing me for future work that calls to me and matters. In addition, this project offered great food for thought about how I organize my work to better sustain myself and incorporate mindfulness and inquiry lessons in my consulting and facilitating.

For example, I've noticed how more accurately diagnosing adaptive challenges can open up a needed conversation with a client who feels stuck. Being mindful of where a group needs to go (regardless of the agenda) has helped us practice presence and focus on needed topics. Recognizing my anxiety to perform in the moment helps me settle down and get out of my own way. These are but a few of the changes I have witnessed this Spring, and they all leave me feeling more aligned with the work that is needed and that I am supposed to do. I am eager to see where the work continues to take me.

References

Adams, D. (2008). Putting heart and soul into research: An inquiry into becoming ‘scholar-practitioner-saint'. *Transformation*, *25*(3), 144-157.

Bentz, V. M, & Shapiro, J.J. (1998). *Mindful inquiry in social research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Brown, R. (2011). The mindful teacher. In J. Simmer-Brown & F. Grace (Eds.), *Meditation and the classroom: Contemplative pedagogy for religious studies* (pp. 75-83). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Chodron, P. (2001). *The places that scare you: A guide to fearlessness in difficult times*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

De Neys, W., Vartanian, O., & Goel, V. (2008). Smarter than we think: When our brains detect that we are biased. *Psychological Science, 19*, 483-489. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02113.x

Fry, L. & Kriger, M. (2009). Towards a theory of being-centered leadership: Multiple levels of being as context for effective leadership. *Human Relations, 62*(11), 1667-1696.

Grace, F. (2011). From content to context to contemplation: One professor's journey. In J. Simmer-Brown & F. Grace (Eds.), *Meditation and the classroom: Contemplative pedagogy for religious studies* (pp. 47-74). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Heifetz, R. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

inquiry. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from Dictionary.com website: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/inquiry

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the widom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness.* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2012). *Mindfulness for beginners: Reclaiming the present moment-and your life.* Boulder, CA: Sounds True.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2004). *Wherever you go, there you are. Mindfulness meditation in everyday life.* New York, NY: Hachette Books.

Kegan, R. & Lahey, L.L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Keng, S-L, Smoski, M.J., & Robins, C.J. (2011). Effects of mindfulness on psychological health: A review of empirical studies. *Clinical Psychology Review, 31*(6), 1041-1056. doi: 10.1016/j.cpr.2011.04.006

Kolb, D.A. (1984). The process of experiential learning. In D.A. Kolb, *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (pp. 20-38). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2011). *All you need to know about action research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Palmer, P.J. (Nov./Dec. 1997). The heart of a teacher: Identity and integrity in teaching. *Change Magazine, 29*(6), 14-21. Retrieved from http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/heart-of-a-teacher/

Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (2001). Inquiry and participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 1-14). London: Sage Publications.

Rohr, R. (2013, August 17). The sacred wound. Retrieved from http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Daily-Meditation----August-17--2013.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=VsvGk1wUnuI

Ruffing, J. (1995). Resisting the demon of busyness. *Spiritual Life, 41*(2), 79-89.

Schein, E.H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership*. (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Wren, J.T. (2007). A quest for a grand theory of leadership. In G.R. Goethals & G.L.J. Sorenson (Eds.), *The quest for a grand theory of leadership* (pp. 1-37). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing.