



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

# Mindful Leadership: When East Meets West

Q&A with: *William W. George*

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*Harvard Business School professor William George is fusing Western understanding about leadership with Eastern wisdom about the mind to develop leaders who are self-aware and self-compassionate. An interview about his recent Mindful Leadership conference taught with a Buddhist meditation master. Key concepts include:*

- *People who are mindful—fully present and aware—can become more effective leaders.*
- *Leaders with low emotional intelligence often lack self-awareness and self-compassion, which can lead to a lack of self-regulation.*
- *Authenticity is developed by becoming more self-aware and having compassion for oneself.*
- *Group support provides nonjudgmental feedback in order to recognize blind spots, accept shortcomings, and gain confidence.*

Asian beliefs, philosophies, and practices are influencing everything from the way we treat the ill to how we make cars. Now, a Harvard Business School professor is looking to the East as a model for developing strong business leaders.

William George, an expert on leadership development, recently teamed with Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche to present a conference on "mindful leadership," a secular process to explore the roles of self-awareness and self-compassion in developing strong and effective leaders.

"To our knowledge, this is the first time that a Buddhist Rinpoche and a leadership professor have joined forces to explore this subject and see how Eastern teaching can inform our Western thinking about leadership and vice versa," George says. You can read George's summary of the Mindful Leadership conference on his Web site.

For George, leaders who don't develop self-awareness are subject to becoming seduced by external rewards, such as power, money, and recognition. They also have difficulty acknowledging mistakes, an Achilles' heel that has crippled a number of CEOs who have appeared in the news recently.

We have set up a forum for readers to give their own ideas on this concept and to ask Professor George questions.

**Sean Silverthorne: Tell us about the Mindful Leadership conference. What were the goals?**

**Bill George:** The Mindful Leadership conference, which was held in Minneapolis August 13-14, 2010, brought together 400 participants in an exploration of how mindfulness can contribute to sustaining effective leadership. The seminar was co-led by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, a leading Buddhist meditation master, and myself.

Its goal was to bring together Western understanding about leadership and Eastern wisdom about the mind, developed from practices that have been used for thousands of years, to contribute to the self-awareness and self-compassion of leaders.

**Q: What is mindful leadership, and what are its benefits?**

**A:** Mindfulness is a state of being fully present, aware of oneself and other people, and sensitive to one's reactions to stressful situations. Leaders who are mindful tend to be more effective in understanding and relating to others, and motivating them toward shared goals. Hence, they become more effective in leadership roles.

**Q: How does one become mindfully aware?**

**A:** I would not claim to be an expert in this area. Our Mindful Leadership seminar focused on the practice of meditation as one of those ways, with a variety of meditation techniques taught by Rinpoche. This was strictly a *secular teaching*, not a Buddhist one. In my experience I have observed people become more mindful through prayer, introspective discussions, therapy, and the use of reflective techniques and exercises.

**Q: You have said that few leaders lose their jobs because of lack of intelligence, but many do so because of lack of emotional intelligence. Can you talk about this a little more and give some examples.**

**A:** Leaders with low emotional intelligence (EQ) often lack self-awareness and self-compassion, which can lead to a lack of self-regulation. This also makes it very difficult for them to feel compassion and empathy for others. Thus, they struggle to establish sustainable, authentic relationships.

Leaders who do not take time for introspection and reflection may be vulnerable to being seduced by external rewards, such as power, money, and recognition. Or they may feel a need to appear so perfect to others that they cannot admit vulnerabilities and acknowledge mistakes. Some of the recent difficulties of Hewlett-Packard, British Petroleum, CEOs of failed Wall Street firms, and dozens of leaders who failed in the post-Enron era are examples of this.

**Q: The two essential aspects of effective leaders, you explain, are self-awareness and self-compassion.**

**A:** An essential aspect of effective leaders is authenticity; that is, being genuine and true to one's beliefs, values, and principles that make up what we call someone's True North.

Authenticity is developed by becoming more self-aware and having compassion for oneself, without which it is very difficult to feel genuine compassion for others. Self-awareness starts with understanding one's life story and the impact of one's crucibles, and reflecting on how these contribute to motivations and behaviors. As people come to accept the less-favored parts of themselves that they do not like or have rejected, as well as learning from failures and negative experiences, they gain compassion for themselves and authenticity in relating to the world around them.

**Q: How does the work you are doing in this area align with your concept of "True North"?**

**A:** In our work on True North and in teaching authentic leadership development to students and seasoned leaders, we have learned that the greatest challenge to following one's True North comes when the pressures and seductions are intense. That is when it is most crucial to be self-aware.

This of course is not a new idea. Self-awareness is central to Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence. It is relatively rare to find people who are fully self-aware. Mindfulness is a logical step in this process of gaining self-awareness that should be combined with experiences in leading through challenging situations and gaining awareness through feedback and group support.

**Q: I know you are a strong believer in group support in the development of leaders. Can you talk a bit about how group support differs from mentorship, for example?**

**A:** Mentorship is a one-to-one process with someone who has greater experience and is willing to share from that experience. Group support as practiced in True North Groups consists of a small number of peers (usually five to eight) willing to share themselves and their lives and support each other through both good and difficult times. A key element of these groups is learning to give and receive nonjudgmental feedback in order to recognize blind spots, accept shortcomings, and gain the confidence to address great challenges in their lives.

**Q: Do you think business schools should be paying more attention to this subject?**

**A:** Any business school committed to developing leaders needs to offer courses and other experiential opportunities that enable students to develop greater awareness of themselves, their motivations, and their strengths and shortcomings.

This process is most effective when real-world experiences can be reflected upon to deepen self-understanding in a supportive and trusting environment. This is the central tenet of the Authentic Leadership Development (ALD) course at Harvard Business School, which will soon to be offered to leaders as part of the School's Executive Education offerings.

**Q: If HBS Working Knowledge readers want to learn more about mindful leadership, which resources would you recommend?**

**A:** Current literature on this subject is limited because the ideas are still in the early stages of development. I highly recommend Jon Kabat-Zinn's book *Wherever You Go, There You Are* and his CD *Guided Mindfulness Meditation*, and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche's books *The Joy of Living* and *Joyful Wisdom*. In the ALD course at HBS, we use my book *True North* and its companion workbook, *Finding Your True North: A Personal Guide*.

**Q: What are you working on next?**

**A:** I am working on a book on peer support groups with Doug Baker that is tentatively titled "True North Groups: The Vital Link." These groups are based on the Leadership Development Groups we use at HBS and the groups Doug and I have participated in for more than 25 years. Many of the ideas we explored in the Mindful Leadership conference will be covered this book. [WK](#)

## About the author

**Sean Silverthorne** is editor-in-chief of HBS Working Knowledge.

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