

# Mindfulness Practices for Ethical Leadership in a Post Covid-19 World

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Received: June 21, 2023

Accepted: July 18, 2023

Online Published: August 1, 2023

doi:10.5430/jms.v14n2p1

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/jms.v14n2p1>

## Abstract

Does embracing a practice of mindfulness nurture and sustain ethical leadership skills in top managers? In this conceptual paper, an attempt has been made to address the question. In the aftermath of Covid-19, existing leadership practices need to be reevaluated and revitalized to meet the expectations of an increasingly interdependent, uncertain, and rapidly changing global business environment. The business environment needs top managers who are able to sustain their ethical leadership skillset, which involves strategic thinking, the capacity to learn, the capacity to change, and managerial wisdom (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Drawing on upper echelons theory, and the ethical leadership framework, first, the characteristics of ethical leaders are outlined. Next, drawing on the theories of social and cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and medicine, the importance of mindfulness to cultivate ethical leadership qualities is highlighted. Finally, mindfulness tools are offered for managers for sustained ethical leadership.

**Keywords:** leadership, ethics, mindfulness, post-Covid 19

## 1. Introduction

Does embracing a practice of mindfulness nurture and sustain ethical leadership skills in top managers? An attempt has been made to explore this important question in the study. In today's global workplace, leaders are faced with the challenges of developing a vision for their organizations, formulating and communicating objectives to key stakeholder groups, mobilizing resources around opportunities, combating threats without compromising on ethical practices or principles, and nurturing and protecting human talent, health, environment, and financial capital (Gelles, 2015). In a post-Covid-19 global environment, these challenges are more severe, and the need for top managers to exhibit ethical thinking and leadership cannot be greater (Eichenauer et al., 2022). Gallup (2022) has warned that the next global crisis may be health-related, stemming from severe stress and burnout among vast sections of society. To address these needs, this paper draws on upper echelons theory, its subsequent refinements, and ethical leadership characteristics, then develops a framework that illustrates the relationships among the variables to serve as the foundation for ethical leadership. Next, using theories from social and cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and medicine, the role of mindfulness in helping managers build and nurture their ethical leadership qualities is explored. Finally, mindfulness tools are offered for managers to sustain their ethical leadership so that they can successfully cope with the needs of the multiple stakeholder groups, such as shareholders/owners, customers, employees, suppliers, and the global community, where stress and burnout have reached catastrophic levels (Gallup, 2022).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Upper Echelons Theory: Why Top Managers Need to Be Ethical Leaders

Hambrick and Mason's (1984) seminal work on upper echelons (UE), rooted in Child's (1972) argument that the decisions of top management impact firm performance, is four decades old; however, the major premise of these researchers—that top managers have a significant impact on the organizations they lead—remains unchallenged. In the UE framework, Hambrick and Mason (1984) placed primary emphasis on the psychological characteristics (to a limited extent) and observable demographic characteristics of top managers, such as age, tenure, educational background, functional and socio-economic background. These demographic characteristics impact strategic choices, which in turn affect the organization's performance (Bantel & Jackson, 1989; Murray, 1989). Other researchers have evaluated and expanded on the UE framework by arguing that, beyond the role of demographic characteristics, the

judgement, psychographics, and power distribution within top management teams also can influence strategic choices (Oppong, 2014; Priem, Lyon, & Dess, 1999). Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996) argued that psychological measures are likely to reveal the types of values, beliefs, and behavioral inclinations relevant to strategic choices and performance. The interest in upper echelons continues to be strong and, in a review article published in 2007, Hambrick argued that top managers engage in behaviors that affect the health, wealth, and welfare of others.

Since research is unequivocal that top managers matter, it is important to examine the leadership practices that they need to embody for the well-being of their employees and organizations. While the history of research on leadership is significant, in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in the aftermath of Covid-19, ethical leadership can be viewed as particularly relevant because of its emphasis on compassionately addressing inequalities in an increasingly inter-dependent global environment (Johnson, 2021; Nahavandi & Krishnan, 2017).

Trevino and Brown (2013) have suggested that ethical leadership encompasses the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct by the leader through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision making. Boal and Hooijberg (2001), in their approach to organizational issues, argued that the essence of leadership today involves the capacity to learn, the capacity to change, managerial wisdom, and the capacity to incorporate the new and emerging theories of leadership, such as transformational and charismatic leadership. Fulmer and Bleak (2007) outlined several reasons for the need for ethical leadership. They argued that the need for ethical leaders cannot be greater, citing increased competition emerging from unexpected quarters, insufficient development of leaders in the external environment and inside the organization, increased globalization, continued inefficiencies in organizational alignment and employee commitment, and lack of integration between leadership development initiatives and business needs. Importantly, Johnson (2021) noted that ethical behavior is more profitable across a wide range of cultural settings, as compared to unethical behavior.

## *2.2 Ethical Leadership Framework*

The ethical leadership framework in Figure 1 displays the characteristics that top managers need to exhibit to serve their organizations and society. As outlined in the framework, which has been developed based on the integrative and comprehensive study by Finkelstein, Hambrick and Cannella (2009) and Johnson's (2021) research, the executive orientation of top managers influences their strategic choices, which in turn has consequences for the organization, individuals, and society. Ethical leaders will be more likely to use the feedback from organizational outcomes to improve their leadership skills. Feedback and a mindset that embraces continuous improvement, are particularly important in today's rapidly changing business landscape.

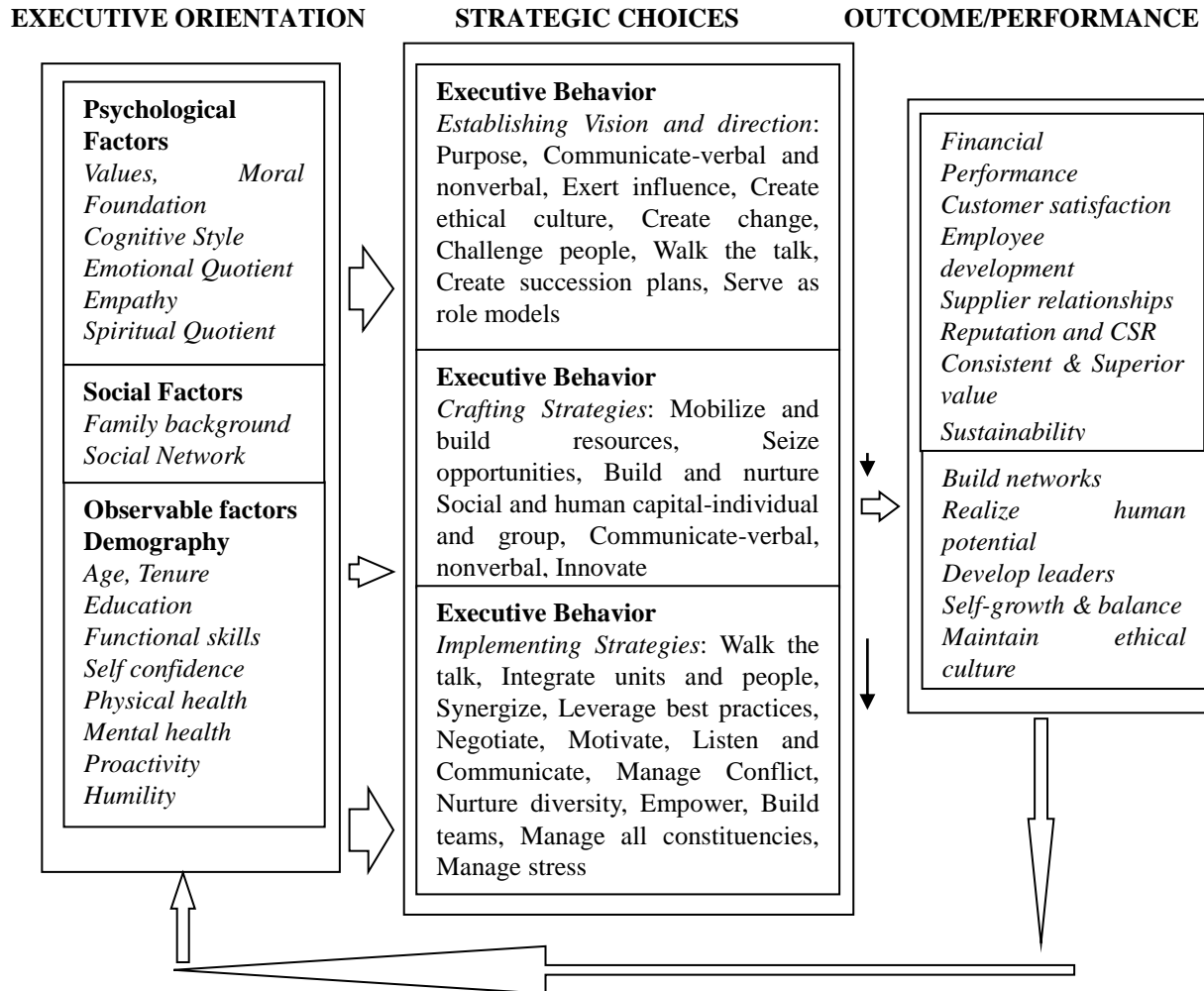


Figure 1. A model of ethical leadership

The figure demonstrates an ethical leadership framework for top managers

Three main factors shape the executive orientation of leaders: psychological factors, social factors, and demographic factors. Psychological factors include values and moral foundation, emotional quotient and health, and the humility and empathy of the individual (Ou et al., 2015). Social factors are derived from the individual’s family background, social network, and online presence. Finally, demographic factors, such as age, tenure, gender, education, functional skills, and physical health, characterize the individual (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996). Although demographic factors have more complexity than psychological measures (Ou et al., 2015), since top managers operate under conditions of bounded rationality, demographic measures can serve as useful proxies to understand leadership, as evidenced from empirical research in this area (Gabarro, 1987; Thomas, Litschert, & Ramaswamy, 1991). Social networks (Collins & Clark, 2003) and online presence have also emerged in recent years as important contributors to leaders’ executive orientation, which can consolidate and cement their reputation.

The three factors that characterize leaders’ executive orientation influence strategic choices for the organization. Previous research in management and leadership suggests that the strategic choices for top management include establishing the vision and direction for the organization, crafting strategies at the corporate and business levels, and implementing strategies for the organization (Cho & Hambrick, 2006; Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2009; O’Reilly, Snyder & Boothe, 1993). In establishing vision, ethical leadership involves communicating the purpose; exercising influence using soft power to gain compliance; building an ethical climate characterized by trust, inclusion, justice, and integrity; and serving as role models (Johnson, 2021). Crafting strategies at the corporate and business levels requires leaders to be able to mobilize, build, and allocate resources; engage in direct and indirect

communication and holistic thinking; build an ethical culture; and be creative and innovative, so that the organization can meet the expectations of the stakeholder groups while simultaneously maintaining a strong, competitive position in the industry (Johnson, 2021; Langer, 1989).

During the stages of crafting and implementing strategies, top managers have a great opportunity to exercise their ethical leadership skills. The crafting and implementing strategy stage involves building and nurturing social and human capital at the individual and group level; integrating units and people; synergizing; leveraging best practices; negotiating; motivating, listening and communicating; empowering; and nurturing diversity (Johnson, 2021). Successful strategy implementation should result in superior organizational performance and be reflected in measures both tangible (financial indicators such as revenue growth, profitability, and market share; customer satisfaction indicators such as returning customers, product quality, and company image; and employee satisfaction indicators such as productivity and retention) and intangible (creativity and innovation, social networks, supplier partnerships, human capital development, enhanced corporate social responsibility, and leadership succession plans).

### 2.3 How Mindfulness Nurtures Ethical Leadership

Cultivating, nurturing, and maintaining ethical leadership skills requires work. In this context, mindfulness, an ancient, time-tested practice with emphasis on the long term, can be a great addition for a top manager's personal growth (Chandwani, Agarwal & Kedia, 2015; Gelles, 2015; Krishnan, 2021). Mindfulness means to remember (Bodhi, 2011), and is a quality or state of mind of being in the present moment and paying attention without judgment (Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Langer, 1989; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Salzberg (2014) has noted that the main function of mindfulness is "insight," which can help cement the ethical foundation of an individual.

The practice of mindfulness originated more than 2500 years ago, from Eastern philosophies and particularly the teachings of Gautama Buddha (Nyanaponika, 1973). In the 1970s, students and philosophers from Western nations spent extended periods of time in Asian countries to learn about mindfulness and meditation from Buddhist monks and teachers. From their long retreats, the early students gained an appreciation for a sustained mindfulness practice on physical and mental well-being (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987; Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 1994, 2003). After the early students disseminated their findings, researchers in cognitive and social psychology were encouraged to study the practice of mindfulness. By the 1980s, interest in mindfulness was widespread, and its role in emotional health was investigated in laboratory settings, which revealed how and why behavioral changes occurred in practitioners (Brown et al., 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Good et al., 2016; Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 2015).

Mindfulness practice entered the business world at the same time, and researchers including Langer (1989) conducted longitudinal studies to document its effects at the individual and team levels in various organizations. The potential for mindfulness to improve leadership skills was recognized from subsequent research studies. In their empirical study, Roche, Haar, and Luthans (2014) found that mindfulness played a positive role on the well-being of CEOs and other individuals including junior level managers and entrepreneurs. The individuals were found to exhibit heightened awareness, and reduced anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion and cynicism. As technology in neuroscience and medicine has continued to accelerate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, research findings on the potential of mindfulness to improve physical health have proliferated (Allen et al., 2012; Baer, 2003; Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Davidson et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, et al., 2015). Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) technology has enabled scientists to perform real-time studies of brain patterns in mindfulness practitioners and to conclude that the brain is malleable, with neural pathways that can change over time (Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Lazar et al., 2015). The evidence-based physiological findings in the fMRI labs coupled with findings from cognitive and social psychology have been reinforced in several anecdotal studies describing the behavior patterns of business executives (Gelles, 2015; George, 2014; Lesser, 2019).

Following four decades of support across a broad spectrum of research for the importance of mindfulness, the impact of mindfulness on leadership growth and development has become more critical. In the high technology sector, companies in Silicon Valley have established separate divisions and programs to implement mindfulness training for their employees. These divisions/programs include Google's *Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute* (SIYLI), Cisco's *Mind set* program, Adobe's *Project Breathe*, and Intel's *awake@Intel*. Mindfulness programs have also been established by companies operating in other sectors, such as consumer food and goods, automobiles, and healthcare (e.g., General Mills, Ford, Target, Green Mountain Coffee, and AETNA). Online streaming companies Netflix, Amazon and Apple boast a wide range of documentaries, movies, and interactive lessons on mindfulness meditation (Amazon, n.d.; Apple, n.d.; Netflix, n.d.).

### 3. Mindfulness Tools for Sustained Ethical Leadership

Mindfulness is one of the few practices that can strengthen an individual’s innate characteristics, cementing ethical thinking and leadership skills (Chandwani, Agarwal & Kedia, 2015; Gelles, 2015; Krishnan, 2021). As Goleman and Davidson (2017) have found in their longitudinal studies, individuals’ psychological characteristics undergo a transformation. Gonzales (2012), from years of experience coaching leaders across a broad spectrum of sectors, has identified that mindful leaders display the following behavioral characteristics: they are present, aware, calm, focused, clear, equanimous, positive, compassionate, and impeccable. A stronger ethical orientation, improved cognitive behavior, higher levels of EQ and empathy, and spirituality have been found in practitioners (Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Ou, et al., 2015; Roche, Haar and Luthans, 2014; Thondup, 1996). Mindfulness is one of the few practices where demographic traits, often viewed as resistant to change, can be improved with time. Long term practitioners display health, self-confidence, and humility (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Goleman & Davidson, 2017). Improved relationships with family and colleagues and expanded domestic and global social networks are also seen in long term practitioners (Brown et al., 2007; Chandwani, Agarwal & Kedia, 2015; Leary & Tate, 2007; Salzberg, 2014).

Mindfulness practices also impact the strategic choices of an individual. As Langer (1989) and Gelles (2015) have reported, mission articulation, and crafting and implementing sound strategies require high levels of EQ, listening skills, clarity and focus, and teamwork. An ethical leader will ensure that, besides the shareholders, owners, or top managers, the organization also delivers to all major stakeholders, including employees, customers, and the natural environment. In the aftermath of Covid-19 and the severe burnout among employee ranks across all industries, employee welfare has never been more important (Gallup, 2022). Table 1 on the next page summarizes mindfulness practices and tools to strengthen an executive’s background characteristics, strategic choices, and outcomes.

Table 1. Mindfulness Practices and Tools

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Strengthen Executive Orientation</i>	<i>Strengthen Strategic Choices</i>	<i>For Superior Outcomes</i>
Mindfulness tools for leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attention to breath: yoga, MBSR, stress management</li> <li>• Mindful breathing</li> <li>• Seek mindfulness mentor/coach</li> <li>• MBCT, laboratories, guided retreats</li> <li>• Mindful body scanning</li> <li>• 3-minute breathing space</li> <li>• Daily journaling</li> <li>• Mental gyms and apps: MUSE, Headspace</li> <li>• Technology tools: Calm, 10% Happier</li> <li>• Mindful technology use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progressive body relaxation</li> <li>• Increased awareness</li> <li>• Mindful meetings, lunch breaks, slow walking</li> <li>• Mindful communication in speech, writing, in all media</li> <li>• Deep compassionate listening, eye contact</li> <li>• Practicing digital detox, mindful technology</li> <li>• Shining spotlight on others and offering praise</li> <li>• Practicing forgiveness, nonjudgement of others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulating personal mission</li> <li>• Articulating values-based mission for organization</li> <li>• Listening sessions across organization</li> <li>• Meta-loving kindness meditation</li> <li>• Tonglen</li> <li>• Implementing 360-degree performance management systems for managers</li> <li>• Guided meditation videos, online group meditations</li> </ul>
Mindfulness impact on leaders and their company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological: kindness, moderation, forgiveness, long term thinking, empathy, trust, reduced ego, servant leadership</li> <li>• Demographic and Physiological: humility, self-confidence, bias for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational mission geared to stakeholder satisfaction-</li> <li>• Strategy implementation-holistic</li> <li>• Human capital development</li> <li>• Productive, inclusive teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial: growth in revenues, profits, market share</li> <li>• Employees: reduced turnover and stress, increased productivity</li> <li>• Customers: improved</li> </ul>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>action, reduced stress, more energy, better general health after long-term practice.</li> <li>• Social networks: deep, nurturing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved negotiation &amp; conflict management</li> <li>• Increased creativity and innovation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>service and products</li> <li>• Better reputation for self and company</li> </ul>
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Among the mindfulness tools available to strengthen an executive's background characteristics, the practice of paying attention to one's breath has been recognized as the most powerful. Salzberg (2014) and other long-time practitioners of mindfulness (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987; Kabat-Zinn, 1994) have advised that once those practicing mindfulness are aware that their mind has wandered (they have cautioned that mind wandering is the norm for all humans), they should gently bring it back to the present moment by focusing on the breath, with compassion and without judgement. Lazar et al., (2015) used fMRI technology to study the brain patterns of long time practitioners and found that meditation was associated with increased cortical thickness, a sign of intellect and improved decision making ability. Goleman and Davidson (2017) have conducted a longitudinal study on mindfulness on Buddhist monks and other individuals, using fMRI technology. The results of their longitudinal study have also revealed altered brain patterns in long term practitioners such as reduced activity in regions of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) associated with distraction. And, in other participants, even a few minutes of breath awareness daily resulted in brief moments of reduced activity in the regions associated with distraction. Lazar et al., (2015) and Goleman and Davidson (2017) have concluded that individuals are likely to gain long term benefits with consistent practice.

To firmly establish daily breath awareness as part of an exercise regimen, the executive needs to set an intention, practice daily, seek a meditation coach, and if needed, enroll in mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) or mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which are offered all over the world (Chaskalson, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2015; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Participation in day- or week-long mindfulness retreats, offered by secular institutions in the USA and other areas of the world, has also increased significantly in recent years among CEOs and other top leaders (George, 2014). Many individuals have also begun practicing daily journaling, which helps in reflection, discernment, and gratitude. To reinforce the importance of breath awareness and to gently guide the individual back to the breath, a multitude of apps are now available. Meditation teachers have teamed up with entertainers and technology developers to introduce and market mindfulness apps such as CALM, 10% Happier, MUSE, and Headspace (Berthon & Pitt, 2019; Harris, 2014).

Basic and anecdotal research has revealed that a consistent practice of breath awareness will result in all-around benefits for the individual (Allen et al., 2012; Baer, 2003; George, 2014; Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Langer, 1989; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Salzberg 2014). At the psychological level, kindness, moderation, forgiveness, long-term thinking, empathy and higher levels of emotional quotient, trust, reduced ego, and servant leadership qualities have been noticed (Goleman, 1998). Physiological changes can be observed in individuals with regular practice as well. Practitioners come across as calm, less stressed, and more energetic (Gonzalez, 2012). Stress reduction is critical because, if left unchecked, it damages the physical and mental health of the individual and the other employees in the organization. Stress-based ailments, which, according to the APA occur from "demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future," have contributed to the spiraling healthcare costs in the USA. Breath training can enable an individual to reduce stress, which can have a ripple effect on other employees in the organization. A consistent practice of breath training enables individuals to improve their interactions with family, friends, and colleagues (Brown et al., 2007; Gonzalez, 2012) and their social networks (Chaskalson, 2011).

A mindfulness practice can enable executives to make wise strategic choices for their organizations. Besides breath training and focus, the mindfulness tools available to formulate and implement sound strategies include the following: progressive body relaxation techniques (systematic relaxation of body starting from feet); internal awareness techniques which pay extraordinary attention to ordinary experiences to build awareness of the thinking mind and the feeling body; external awareness techniques which train an individual to be in the present moment by turning attention to touch, sight and sound; and imagining positive outcomes with mental imagery and accepting that uncertainty and change are inevitable (Gonzalez, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Resource mobilization, effective communication, exerting influence to align the organization to its mission, and nurturing and building human capital is extremely important for strategy formulation and implementation (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Krishnan, 2021).

Among the mindfulness tools available are organizing and conducting mindful meetings, mindful lunch breaks, and mindful communication (Salzberg, 2014).

Mindful communication is a multifaceted construct and includes mindful reading, mindful writing, and mindful speaking in all formats, including communication in face-to-face situations, electronic communication (such as emailing), communication in virtual settings, and communication in social media (Chaskalson, 2011). Salzberg (2014) has stated that human beings are inextricably linked to those around us and that there is a vital link between good communication, skillful self-expression, and integrity. Among the practices suggested to improve communication skills are sitting quietly and reflecting, mindful reading, writing, and speaking, where the individual pauses and takes a deep breath before formulating responses (Salzberg, 2014). To develop a practice for mindful emailing, Salzberg (2014) has recommended that people sit for a few minutes and feel the breath, then reflect, compose the email, place themselves in the recipient's shoes while re-reading the email, revise if needed, take a few deep breaths, and then send the message.

Often ignored in the communication process is the impact of deep and compassionate listening using gentle eye contact (if the setting is face-to-face). Fine (2022) has observed that listening is a core competency for leaders and that psychological barriers such as fear and bias need to be addressed and overcome to develop listening skills. To improve one's listening skills, Salzberg (2014) has recommended a short exercise with a trusted partner where the first member speaks for two minutes, and the other member listens without interruption or judgement. After the 2-minutes are up, a bell is rung, and the two partners sit in silence for a minute with eyes closed. The process is repeated with the other speaker sharing what is meaningful. Regular practice builds gratitude, generosity, empathy, patience, and compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Business leaders have acknowledged the importance of mindful listening. In February 2021, Bob Iger announced that he was resigning as Disney CEO. In Iger's words, one reason he stepped down was that "over time, I started listening less and maybe with a little less tolerance of other people's opinions. Maybe because of getting a little bit more overconfident in my own, which is sometimes what happens when you get built up" (*Inc.*, December 2021).

Organizations require creativity and innovation in their product lines, services, processes, and systems to be competitive in their industry (Krishnan, 2021; Kudesia, 2015). Besides the mindfulness tools detailed earlier such as breath awareness, progressive body relaxation and mindful communication, additional tools to enhance creativity and innovation, negotiate better with teams, and nurture human capital include regularly disconnecting or detoxing from technology (Harris, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2015; Salzberg, 2014). Consistent practice of brief moments of digital detox during the workday can work wonders for the tired brain (Harris, 2014). Digital detox can be practiced by taking short solitary walks outside in nature, or indoors in the hallways, or by sitting and doing nothing (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1989; Salzberg, 2014). Digital detox can help a leader to shift context and acquire new energy (Berthon & Pitt, 2019; Langer, 1989), which is especially important before entering situations involving tough negotiations, conflict resolution, or performance reviews. Staying calm in these situations can result in a favorable outcome for the individual, team, or organization (Goleman, 1998). A change in the mental shift can also improve creativity and productivity and help the leader inspire and motivate teams (Langer, 1989).

To make wise and ethical strategic choices that will result in favorable outcomes, a regular practice of Metta, or Loving Kindness, can be most beneficial. In Metta, one wishes wellness for themselves and others. It involves repeating the phrases, "May I be happy, may I be safe, may I be healthy, and may I be peaceful." The individual then extends these wishes for family or friends, colleagues, difficult people, and to the world at large (Gelles, 2015; Salzberg, 2014).

Although mindfulness training has entered the corporate world only in recent years, initial results in companies that have integrated mindfulness training are promising (George, 2014; Harris, 2014) and lend credence to its role in improving leadership skills. As illustrated in Figure 1, an ethical executive orientation, honed by consistent mindfulness practice, is likely to enable the leader to craft and implement strategies grounded in ethics and inclusivity across the major stakeholders and position the organization for sustained competitive advantage (Fine, 2022; Krishnan, 2021). Leaders need to be vigilant in monitoring the tangible and intangible performance of the organization so that its ethical culture is sustained, as is the mindful workplace (Trevino & Brown, 2013). Great leaders and the organizations they serve thrive on strong feedback systems (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Trevino & Brown, 2013). Mindfulness tools to monitor performance, so that the firm can make improvements in its strategies, include the following: articulation of a personal mission statement by the leaders; maintaining a daily reflection/gratitude journal; holding regular listening sessions across the organizations, where employees can share

their ideas and provide feedback without fear of retribution; and implementing 360-degree performance appraisal systems for top leaders and management (Gonzales, 2012; Lesser, 2019; Salzberg, 2014).

#### 4. Conclusion and Implications

In this conceptual paper, prior research on ethical leadership for top management teams has been reviewed and a case has been made for integrating mindfulness in the tool-kit of leaders. Ethical leadership, which is of critical importance today, can be nurtured and strengthened with a regular practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness practice has existed for thousands of years, and its importance has been discussed in all major spiritual traditions of the world (Goleman and Davidson, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). More than three years after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, despite advances in medicine and pharmacology and improvements in the manufacture and distribution of vaccines, hundreds continue to succumb to this illness on a daily basis even in the developed nations. The pandemic has disrupted the lives of people all over the world and while millions have suffered health crises and financial losses, Covid-19 has also wreaked havoc on social and psychological fronts (Eichenauer et al., 2022). Employee burn-out is at an all-time high, and in such an environment the need for ethical leadership could not be greater (Gallup, 2022).

Mindfulness is evidence-based (Goleman & Richardson, 2017) and offers various tools for leaders to cope with their own psychological and physiological health while coping with the demands of their constituencies. Mindfulness practices can enable leaders to sustain their ethical leadership skill set, which is the foundation for wise strategic choices and favorable organizational outcomes in an increasingly complex global environment (Harris, 2014). A sustained mindfulness practice on the part of top leadership will set the tone for the rest of the organization, as evidenced from anecdotal studies (George, 2014; Lesser, 2019) and the collective body of work by researchers in cognitive and social science, as well as neuroscience and medicine (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Langer, 1989). Enabling the individual to exhibit compassion for self and others produces a more harmonious environment, which is important for team productivity and satisfaction, and for improving leadership competencies (Fine, 2022; Salzberg, 2014).

For leaders who are eager to start on this path and implement mindfulness in the workplace, Chaskalson (2011) has suggested valuable resources, including peer-reviewed articles and links to training programs on mindfulness. Finally, many corporate leaders have completed the MBSR course pioneered by Kabat-Zinn (2013, 2015) to help them cope with stress and burnout and to continue with their mindfulness practice. An outline of a typical 8-week MBSR course for leaders who want to learn more about this program and its potential benefits can be found in Chaskalson (2011). The MBSR course is particularly of value because it provides action steps for individuals to hone their psychological characteristics, the strategies and choices they make for themselves and their organizations, and, importantly, their active and selfless role in executing strategies with manageable levels of stress. The MBSR course is customized for the corporate world, and the tools for self-management, relaxation, and acceptance that it introduces can be applied by busy executives even at their workplaces. Mindful eating, brief body-scan meditation, mindful movements, mindful walking, mindful communication, and 1- or 3-minute breathing exercises can be performed even at work since they do not require any special equipment. Ideally, corporate leaders will nurture their ethical leadership skills by embracing this practice for their well-being and the well-being of the constituencies they serve.

This conceptual study has a few limitations which future empirical studies may be able to address. First, the inclusion of three major constructs, mindfulness, ethical leadership, and Covid-19, warrants a more in-depth examination of their inter-connectedness, and their applicability in practical settings. This investigation was beyond the scope of the study. Future researchers may want to conduct longitudinal empirical studies in companies that have incorporated mindfulness in their corporate training programs and whether mindfulness has had a positive impact on ethical leadership especially among the C suite leaders. We are already in year 4 following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and useful results may be obtained from such empirical studies. Second, researchers may want to study companies indexed in the ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) sector in particular, to examine if mindfulness programs are implemented in these companies and whether such programs have a positive impact on bottom line profitability, beyond the results generated from a people-planet emphasis by ESG companies. Third, empirical studies that examine whether mindfulness moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and firm performance are likely to provide further clarity to this research stream. Finally, as the global workforce becomes more multi-generational, more diverse, and experiences increased technology overload, is an ethical leader who is also mindful the most likely leader to deliver results for all stakeholder groups across all industry sectors? This is a worthy research question.



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