COULD RELATIONAL MINDFULNESS HELP US COACH?

Coach, supervisor and teacher Dr Emma Donaldson-Feilder shares a relational form of mindfulness to help coaches and their clients address the challenges of a complex, changing world through developing greater awareness and wisdom.

Unremitting change was already a reality before Covid-19, and yet the pandemic has transformed the context in which we and our coaching clients are operating – and promises to bring ongoing and ever faster-change for the foreseeable future. Organisational leaders in all sectors are facing challenges they could not have imagined in 2019. The pandemic and consequent economic problems have disrupted markets, turned operating models upside down, and forced a total rethink about how and where employees work.[i] The unequal health and financial impacts have exacerbated and helped illuminate existing inequalities and, coinciding with the outpouring of emotion around Black Lives Matter, amplified demand for more inclusive, fairer workplaces and societies. Mental health problems, already a key workplace health issue, have both escalated and risen up the agenda over the last year[ii], as has awareness of the digital overload with which so many are dealing. Complexity, uncertainty and volatility can no longer be ignored by anyone, least of all those leading and managing organisations, and the interdependent and complex adaptive nature of the systems within which we exist has become undeniable.

As coaches and leadership development practitioners, we must help our clients find ways to address these challenges and the systemic shifts they demand. We need to help them understand and learn from multiple perspectives, show compassion and kindness, collaborate effectively, and bring a wise approach to addressing the issues they face.[iii] To do all this, they will need a combination of awareness, relational qualities and wisdom:

- **Awareness** allows them to bring full attention into the moment, recognise their own assumptions and be fully present with others, even when that is uncomfortable.
- **Relational qualities** such as compassion, kindness, genuine care, trust, respect and a sense of common humanity.
- **Wisdom** to recognise that we all have different world views, to seek and understand diverse perspectives, think in more systemic and complex ways, take hard decisions and give difficult feedback with humanity and humility.

In our coaching and in our lives, we need to embody and support development of these qualities. We must provide the psychological safety[iv] that enables our clients to challenge their assumptions, see their patterns and habits, and find creative, generative ways forward.[v] My proposition is that relational mindfulness has the potential to help us do this.

AWARENESS, RELATIONAL QUALITIES AND WISDOM

Over the last 10 or more years, as a result of my personal experience of – and the growing literature on – the benefits of mindful awareness, I have spent an increasing amount of time exploring ways of bringing mindful awareness into relational activities such as leadership and coaching. My doctoral research examined, firstly, the use of mindfulness and meditation within leadership development[vi] and, secondly, the potential for using a relational form of mindfulness practice to develop leadership capability.[vii] Through my research and practice, I have understood the mutually supportive nature of mindful awareness and relational qualities (such as kindness, compassion, collaboration) and how both these capacities contribute to and benefit from wisdom/insight. The more I learn, the more my enthusiasm for relational mindfulness grows.

By 'relational mindfulness' (RM), I mean taking mindful awareness specifically into the relational or interpersonal sphere. For all forms of mindful awareness, it is helpful to have a 'formal practice' in which we build our capacity to be mindful in order that we can practise 'informally' in our day-to-day lives. Most formal mindfulness practices are individual, inviting awareness of particular objects of attention, such as bodily sensations, thoughts, emotions, the senses and/or a mantra. By contrast, formal RM practice is interpersonal and invites mindful awareness right into the moment of interacting with another person or group of people. The particular form of RM that I practise/offer is based on Insight Dialogue (ID), which was developed by Gregory Kramer in the US[viii] and was mentioned in the July issue of *Coaching Perspectives*.[ix] ID is a form of meditation that shares the intentions of the Buddhist insight meditation tradition, aiming to give insights into the human condition. The distinctive element in ID is that it adds a relational dimension to the process of meditation and insight. ID is practised with others in meditative dialogue, supported by a set of guidelines to anchor the mindful nature of the practice and by contemplation topics that steer the mindful speaking and listening.[x]

My experience, and the reported experience of colleagues, is that practising ID-based RM has taken our mindfulness to a new level and better enabled us to embody mindful presence in our coaching. When we practise RM formally, the mindful presence of our meditation partner enhances our own mindfulness. This is explained by the operation of neuropsychological mechanisms, such as mirror neurons and 'brain coupling', which enable resonance between human beings and a sense of connection.[xi] Through repeated practice, we ingrain a habit of, or neurological circuit for, bringing awareness into our relational interactions in both formal meditation and 'informal' daily life. In beautiful symmetry, not only does relationship support mindfulness, but mindfulness also supports relationship. When people practise RM, they are invited to be fully present with themselves and their dialogue partner in each unfolding moment. This level of presence with a fellow human being naturally gives rise to empathy, compassion, kindness, and well-wishing for each other.[xii]

Perhaps most interestingly for us as coaches and leadership development practitioners, RM offers access to wisdom and insights that arise naturally from and feed back into mindful awareness and relationship. As we slow down the process of speaking and listening in meditative dialogue, we begin to gain insight into, and have choices about, our relational patterns and habits. Meanwhile, because RM involves mindfully listening to another person's views, it provides the chance either to see how we share common human concerns and challenges, or to gain a different perspective on the same question, or both. It can emphasise both our common humanity and the rich diversity of the human experience, and it can reveal over and over that our way of seeing the world is just one of many.

While there are clearly no simple solutions to the enormous challenges we face as a society, I believe that RM could have a part to play. Firstly, as coaches and leadership development practitioners, RM can be part of our professional development; it can help us embody awareness, relational qualities and wisdom in our coaching and development programmes, which can both enhance our coaching/facilitation and model these capacities for our clients. Secondly, if and when we are sufficiently proficient, we can invite leaders and influencers themselves to practise RM as part of their development, perhaps by offering RM sessions as part of a leadership programme or setting up RM practice sessions for our clients. Over time, a growth in awareness, relationality and wisdom has the potential to support inclusive, collaborative and wise ways forward.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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