

The Mindful Director

Article for AICD Governance Leadership Centre by Gillian Coutts, Sue O’Dea and Robyne Blood

The crucial role of directors to the success of any company – public, private and not-for-profit – is well understood. Their role is vast, and includes corporate strategy, performance, risk, increasing company value, managing corporate governance and, of course, the appointment, evaluation and succession planning of the chief executive officer.

It is also understood that capability, independence and diversity are important factors to consider in composing the membership of boards to fulfill this crucial role. The right mix of these factors enables the board to thrive in an increasingly complex and ever changing business landscape where demands on directors’ time, attention and performance may seem unrelenting. Could it be possible that attracting ‘Mindful Directors’ – committed to an active practice that cultivates focus, clarity, stress mitigation and broad awareness – is also an important factor in board composition? We think so.

Most directors today face increasing pressure to be across and accountable for more and more, and they are often overloaded with information such as lengthy board packs. They face these challenges in environments increasingly filled with distractions. This is the new normal.

Despite their best attempts, many boards and their executives find it tough going. They can feel overwhelmed, yet are concerned not to show it. Sometimes this feeling may come on gradually, taking a director by surprise, and potentially resulting in an autopilot mode of functioning that is not consciously chosen. This can lead to issues such as a failure to recognise subtle changes in context which should drive heightened vigilance, or failure of the opportunity to listen deeply for cues to pursue alternative lines of inquiry.

In our view, the way to succeed in this tough reality isn’t just doing more of the same and simply hoping for a different outcome. Our experience suggests the key to enhancing governance, performance and wellbeing in today’s fast-paced work environments is about ensuring we are focusing on the right things, as opposed to just what’s in front of us. As self-evident as that sounds, it can be astoundingly difficult to do when we are caught in a cycle of trying to catch up with ourselves and stay on top. The solution lies in a different paradigm altogether - deliberately training the mind to not just manage what’s on our agenda, but also to optimise our mind and brain to remain calm, focused and clear even in the midst of demanding business environments.

Mindfulness training for as little as 10 minutes a day has been shown in multiple studies to provide a whole raft of benefits, including improved focus, greater wellbeing, reduced experience of stress, as well as objectively rated improvements in job performance¹.

¹ Shonin, E.S., van Gordon, W., Dunn, T., Singh, N. & Griffiths, M.D. (2014). *Meditation Awareness Training (MAT) for work-related wellbeing and job performance: A randomized controlled trial*. International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, 12, 806–823

The Attention Economy

Not a lot of attention is paid to how directors focus their attention. With the need to compute massive reams of information in preparation for board meetings – at which time further information is presented, potentially creating a flux of perspectives – directors are challenged to reach the pinnacle of their ability to focus. In reality, we are wired to be able to fully and deliberately attend to only one thing at a time. Sure, we can do multiple mindless tasks at once. But when it comes to bringing a thoughtful mind and judgment to any matter, we need to be masterful in noticing where our attention is, and also deliberately focusing our attention on the present moment.

According to the former director of the Accenture Institute of Strategic Change, Tom Davenport: “Understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success.” In our view, we are living in an ‘Attention Economy’ where the ability to manage our attention and the *quality* of our attention is key to successfully fulfilling our responsibilities as directors. But when our ability to pay attention waivers, we have a problem.

How big is this problem? Researchers studying the mind’s natural tendency to wander calculated that on average our mind wanders 46.9 percent of the time². In other words, while we are at work, 53.1 percent of the time our mind is on task. It’s off task the rest of the time. From a board performance perspective there is a lot of potential here to be accessed. Even just a small increase in ‘on task’ time could have a significant improvement in key aspects of a director’s performance, including decision-making, strategic thinking and boardroom dynamics.

Attention wandering is a natural neurological tendency. But in the HBR article, “Overloaded Circuits, Why Smart People Underperform”³, researcher Edward Hallowell outlines the fact that attention wandering has increased drastically over recent decades. He concludes, “Modern life and an increasingly common condition called attention deficit trait are turning steady executives into frenzied underachievers.” While most directors would not consider themselves ‘frenzied underachievers,’ many would recognise some validity in Hallowell’s findings.

The attack on our attention is particularly significant at the leadership and board level. In the McKinsey Quarterly article ‘Recovering from information overload’⁴, they explain that attention fragmentation hits boards and their executive colleagues in the C-suite particularly hard because they so badly need to synthesise information from many different sources, reflect on its implications for the organisation, apply judgment, make trade-offs and arrive at good decisions.

The big question is whether we are destined to have minds in our boardrooms that wander, lose focus and don’t perform to their full potential?

Thankfully, the answer is no. Attention can be developed, trained and strengthened. It’s much like a muscle. We can enhance our attentiveness to the task at hand. Mindfulness is the method.

² Killingsworth MA, Gilbert DT. A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind. *Science* 12 November 2010: Vol. 330. no. 6006, p. 932 DOI: 10.1126/science.1192439

³ Harvard Business Review: “Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform”, Edward M. Hallowell, 2005

⁴ McKinsey Quarterly, January 2011

And make no mistake – mindfulness is no touchy-feely, new age concept. Based on thousands of years of development, mindfulness is a rigorous practice of enhancing focus and clarity of mind, while opening the eyes to potential. It is a practice of mental high performance, and in many ways an answer to the challenges of today’s increasingly pressured and information overloaded reality.

Mindfulness and the Attention Economy

So training our mind is possible. Decades of research shows our brains are constantly changing accordingly to how we use them. As Baroness Susan Greenfield, an eminent British scientist specialising in the physiology of the brain, said at the 2015 AICD’s Company Directors Conference in Kuala Lumpur “... as you have individual experiences, they leave a mark on your brain.” It’s called neuroplasticity.

In short, the way we use our brain reshapes it. Any action we do or thought we think is creating neural pathways in our brain, making it is easier to repeat that action or thought. The brain is changing according to how we use it. This means we are not predefined by what we *are* now, but rather we are recreating ourselves by what we *do* now. Every moment we spend with a focused and clear mind enhances focus and clarity as a trait of our brain. We are not destined to have a wandering mind. We can train ourselves and gain high levels of attention, focus and clarity of mind and thereby become better leaders of our own lives and the organisations we serve. The reverse is unfortunately true too; the more distracted we are, the more distractible we become, unless we find a circuit breaker such as mindfulness training.

Mindfulness is about being able to manage your wandering mind and external distractions, actively promoting sharp focus and insight, while at the same time being fully aware but not distracted by what is going on around you. Research has shown the practice to have an impressive list of side effects, including a stronger immune system, lower blood pressure, reduced stress, better sleep, improved cognitive function, enhanced awareness, increased job satisfaction, better work life balance, enhanced creativity and better overall quality of life⁵.

Realising benefits from mindfulness requires formal training, which can be viewed as going to the gym for the mind. Our approach to mindfulness training includes helping individuals enhance their focus and awareness – critical skills for today’s boards. Focus is about training the mind to maintain sharp focus on a particular topic, conversation or task, with minimal distraction, for a long as you want, with minimal effort. Awareness is about training the mind to be open and see clearly what is happening internally and externally and make wise choices about where to focus your attention. Instructions on an example of formal mindfulness training are presented at the end of this article.

⁵ J Altern Complement Med. 2010 Aug;16(8):867-73:“Effects of brief and sham mindfulness ... on mood and cardiovascular variables”. Zeidan, *et al*. Consciousness and Cognition. 2010 Jun;19(2):597-605. “Mindfulness... improves cognition: evidence of brief mental training”. Zeidan, *et al*.

The Mindful Director

In our view, mindfulness is a foundational skill for being an effective director. Mindfulness is about developing high levels of self-management by switching off the autopilot and developing heightened self and situational awareness. Mindfulness also cultivates the ability to be more aware of others, which is a cornerstone for a director's performance – both inside and outside the board room. In the enduring words of Peter Drucker, “we can't manage others unless we learn to manage ourselves first.”

One long standing director we interviewed for this article who has sat on ASX top 50 boards spoke about the impact that mindfulness skills have had on her capacity as a director. As a result of greater focus and awareness, she says, “I can operate with greater speed and clarity. I have more capacity to respond rather than just react.” Building trust has become easier. “I'm less attached to my own point of view and just getting this understood by others, and more able to deftly inquire.” Self-regulation has improved too. “I am now more aware of when I am stirred up by a conversation, and can choose more constructive phrases and tones in which to respond.”

International studies have found a more mindful approach improves ethical decision making⁶. This finding is echoed by the comments of the experienced board member and Chair who we interviewed. “At the highest level, I'm better able to see independencies and act in the interests of the organisation. I find I am able to access more data in different forms and levels across the organisation. I am better able to operate with and access diversity – rather than being limited by my own thinking, I find I can seek and synthesise more diverse perspectives.” Deliberately engaging in mindfulness practices can allow the best of a director's experience to be applied. Longer-term mindfulness practitioners can develop sharper insight, which ultimately benefits all.

It is also worth considering the impact on a board as a whole if more directors become mindful of themselves and others, and have greater situational awareness. For a start, the quality of dialogue would be enhanced among board members and, importantly, also with executives. Individuals would be better able to see and disclose the assumptions that underpin their opinions and recommendations, and would be more prepared to explore the underpinning assumptions of others. The quality of decision-making would be enhanced, the ability to deal with conflicting views would improve, and board/executive relationships would likely be strengthened, helping the organization to thrive in a complex environment.

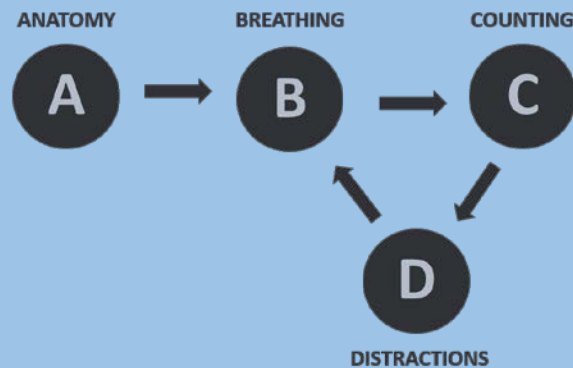
Could it be that the next level of performance for directors and their boards is through training the mind to have greater focus, calm and clarity, even in the midst of daily busyness and life's inevitable curve balls? If you want to achieve more of your potential as a director and in life, the best place to start is with your mind. Why not give it a try?

⁶ Karellaia, Natalia and Reb, Jochen, Improving Decision Making Through Mindfulness (May 30, 2014). Forthcoming in Mindfulness in Organizations, Reb, J., & Atkins, P. (Eds.), Cambridge University Press.; INSEAD Working Paper No. 2014/43/DSC.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR DAILY MINDFULNESS TRAINING

A formal daily mindfulness training is the back bone of cultivating greater understanding of the inner workings of you mind and learning how to manage it to enhance performance, effectiveness and well-being. We recommend spending ten minutes a day, Monday to Friday, incorporating this daily training into your routine just like brushing your teeth. In general the morning is the best time for most, but it can be done at any time that suits you best.

The Training has four pillars, anatomy, breathing, counting and dealing with distractions.



ANATOMY:

- Sit comfortably on a chair. Feet on the ground. In balance. Keep a straight back.
- Relax your neck, shoulders and arms.
- Close your eyes and breathe through your nose.

BREATHING:

- Direct your full attention to the experience of your breath at your nose.
- Observe it neutrally, without trying to control it. Like watching waves coming to, and leaving the shore.
- In a relaxed manner, constantly monitor the experience of your breath.

COUNTING:

- To help your focus staying with the breath, count one count at the end of each exhalation.
- When you reach up to ten, start counting backwards down to one.
- Count back and forward like this.
- If you lose your count, start at one again.

DISTRACTIONS

- Distractions are everything that is not the breath. Sounds, thoughts, bodily sensations etc.
- Any distraction is like a helping friend, telling you that you are off track and not with the breath anymore.
- Whenever you encounter a distraction, acknowledge it and return your attention to your breath.

An app can be a great tool to get you guided through the practice. Search for The Potential Project Mindfulness in your app store.

Source:  **potential project** www.potentialproject.com

The authors

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Gillian Coutts is Partner of The Potential Project Australia. The Potential Project is the leader in customised leadership and organisational training programs based on mindfulness. The firm has a proven track record of enhancing individual and collective performance, resilience and creativity. The Potential Project works with over 200 companies in 22 countries across North America, Europe, Asia and Australia. Clients of The Potential Project include Herbert Smith Freehills, Accenture, Nike, American Express, Microsoft and Sony as well as many smaller start-ups and boutique firms. The objective of their programs is to enhance individual and organisational performance and well-being through skillful application of mindfulness in a corporate context. Gillian is co-author of the book “One Second Ahead – Enhance Your Performance with Mindfulness” published in October 2015. She is also Deputy Chair of Uniting, the Aged Care and Community Services provider in NSW/ACT.

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Robyne is a Senior Associate with the Potential Project in Australia and the founding Partner for it in New Zealand. As director of Positive Organisational Development Robyne also consults to large organisations on Leadership, Culture and Change.

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Sue has 20 years of organizational consulting experience, including 8 years with McKinsey & Company. Mindfulness has been an integral element in her advisory work with leaders in multiple sectors around the world.