Perspectives on
IPNB in the Workplace

The Mind to Lead Model: Leadership Attunement Develops Calm, Confident Power

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I recently commented to one of my leadership coaching clients, "Other than parenting, managing is the hardest job in the world."

She corrected me. "No, managing is harder. At least your kids grow up and move out."

Though some offspring may seem to never completely grow up or move out, she might be right that managing is harder. Managers and leaders inherit employees whom they not only didn't raise from birth, but who may bring traumatic memories or attachment struggles with them to the workplace. Staying calm and confident while attempting to lead and influence even the most mentally healthy staff is an ongoing challenge for leaders today.

Most leaders throughout the ages probably had to handle resistance both from employees who reported to them as well as from their boss or Board of Directors. Technology in the 21st century has magnified those basic leadership challenges. Consider the inordinate amount of information that many leaders ask their minds to process. Some leaders receive 100-200 emails per day, and, due to global markets, feel compelled to be on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Beyond quantity overload, the quality of information is complex and constantly changing. In addition to their management responsibilities, some leaders are also subject matter experts in fields with continuously evolving technology, standards, and stakeholders. All of these factors make it more difficult for leaders to manage staff members who are also experiencing increasing job complexity.

This article describes a leadership coaching model that is based on interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB). IPNB is an interdisciplinary field of study exploring "the idea that the mind develops at the interface between human relationships and the unfolding structure and function of the brain" (Siegel, 2001, p. 67). The Mind to Lead Model helps leaders (1) understand the social nature of the brain, and (2) use simple relating tools to connect with and influence their employees to reach organizational goals.

After training thousands and coaching hundreds of leaders over the last twenty years, I've heard repeatedly that what leaders most want are to:

1. Stay calm
2. Be confident
3. Use power appropriately

Calm means maintaining physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral composure. Confidence is the belief or trust in one's ability to act in a reliable way. Power is the ability to take action, particularly to influence people and processes. Staying calm and being confident are predominantly internal experiences, while using

power is an external expression of one's leadership ability.

I developed the Mind to Lead Model to help leaders cultivate these three mindsets regardless of the intense challenges in their jobs and organizations. Leaders develop each mindset through a process called attunement.

Attunement entails sensing what is going on for others and then respectfully mirroring their experience back to them. Their experience includes what's happening internally in the body and mind as well as what they convey externally through behavior. Leaders use their senses - like seeing, hearing, and intuition - to pick up cues about what they think other people are experiencing. I call this observant aspect of the mind The Reporter.

Like good leaders, good reporters are intelligent, curious, unbiased, and analytical. In addition, good reporters separate their own personal experience from what they are reporting on, even if it is deeply upsetting or personally threatening. And, most importantly, no matter what is happening, reporters stay calm. One famous example is Chicago radio reporter, Herbert Morrison, who was taping a report about the Hindenburg in New Jersey in 1937 when, just before landing, the large blimp exploded right before his eyes. Despite extreme distress, he continued to report on the rescue efforts and interviewed survivors.

Regardless of what is happening in the workplace, the leader's Reporter calmly notes the facts and feelings of a situation. Then, the leader uses verbal and nonverbal expression to communicate, "I get it," back to the other person. This reflective process with another person is called *interpersonal attunement* (Siegel, 2007). It allows the other person to feel heard and understood, which contributes to positive feelings such as safety and trust.

In order to become skilled at receiving and interpreting signals from other people, it is important for leaders, first, to be able to pick up signals from themselves. This heightened self-reflective relationship is called *intrapersonal attunement* (Siegel, 2007). Intrapersonal attunement also relies on the unbiased Reporter who observes and then describes the leaders' experiences back to themselves.

Whether in inter- or intrapersonal attunement, the Reporter conveys information in categories that I call the *four realms* of experience:

1. Physical: body sensations
2. Mental: thoughts, memories, ideas
3. Emotional: feelings
4. Behavioral: actions, nonverbal and verbal communication

Leaders tune into the four realms of their target person, receive the person's messages or cues, and respond with honest empathy. Similar to how skilled tennis players monitor both themselves and their opponent, attuned leaders oscillate their awareness between their own and the other person's realms of experience. In conversations, leaders should focus more than half of their awareness on the other person's experience. However, they should also be aware of their own experience as well as the boundary between themselves and the other person.

Over time and the building of an attuned relationship with self or another, individuals may express increasingly frank thoughts and feelings. When people trust that communication will be met with a respectful response, openness expands.

In order to achieve the desired outcome - calm, confident power - leaders cultivate three attunement processes: Mindfulness, Exploration, and Influence (Figure 1, next page). The Mind to Lead Model trains leaders to use the three processes to refine both intrapersonal and interpersonal attunement. The remainder of this article describes the first attunement process, mindfulness.

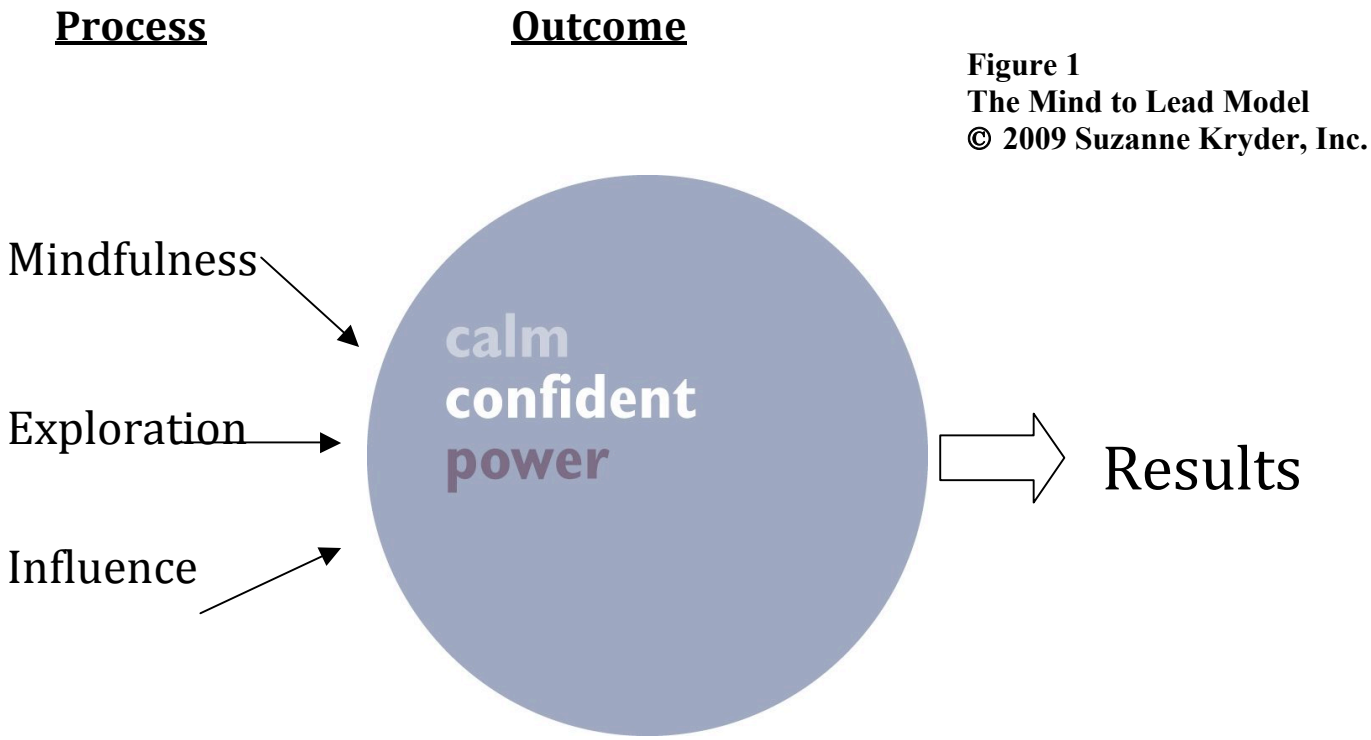

Figure 1
The Mind to Lead Model
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Mindfulness is "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Jon Kabat-Zinn did some powerful early research on mindfulness through the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. He and his colleagues showed that patients who were no longer being helped by conventional medicine were aided by MBSR training. Patients experienced improved immune function, accelerated rates of healing, and reduced subjective states of suffering (Davidson et al., 2003, p. 569). Over the last thirty years, MBSR has been used in hundreds of programs around the world. Research done on MBSR and other forms of mindful awareness in medical, mental health, and workplace settings has demonstrated its value for a wide variety of populations.

Mindfulness uses the Reporter to separate leaders' perceptions from how they report about them. When leaders' minds pay attention to what's happening in the present moment and calmly describe it without judgment, they lessen their internal battle over things not being exactly how they want them to be. In addition to focusing the mind in the present moment, Dan Siegel proposes that mindfulness inhibits top-down processing, so that the mind is aware of more incoming information and not so heavily influenced by the past (Siegel, 2007).

An important research study identified the key components of mindfulness. Baer and colleagues administered five different mindfulness questionnaires to participants to determine if mindful awareness has one central dimension or several facets (Baer et al., 2006). Each of the five surveys had a different focus, but overall they measured the subjects' direct experience of mindfulness. The results of this study identified five general facets of mindfulness. Three of those facets were shown to have incremental validity in the prediction of psychological symptoms (Baer et al., 2006):

1. Nonreactivity to inner experience
2. Nonjudging of experience
3. Acting with awareness

To show how the three facets of mindfulness impact a leader's sense of calm, I'll use the story of a client, Judith, accidently spilling milk on her desk. Initially, she was surprised by the external event: "Yikes!" Internally, she noticed a brief flash of irritation. But, thanks to mindfulness, she was nonreactive to her irritation. In other words, she felt her irritation but didn't linger on it or get upset about being upset; she quickly returned to a baseline calm state. In fact, Baer's study says that, if anything, a mindful reaction to internal irritation is less likely one of upset and more likely one of self-compassion. Instead of thinking, "I'm a klutz," Judith might have expressed empathy to herself with, "I'm sorry that happened. How can I help me?"

How did mindfulness lead to her nonreactivity? Scientists think that mindful awareness induces nonreactivity by altering the connection between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic area. The limbic system includes a pair of almond-shaped structures called amygdalae; there's one in each hemisphere of the brain. They're involved in emotional processing and memory. In particular, the amygdalae are involved in the fear response known as "fight or flight" which includes rapid heartbeat, increased respiration, freezing (immobility), and stress-hormone release.

When her amygdalae reacted to the spilled milk, it was like stepping on the accelerator in a car. Her agitation increased. But, Judith's mindfulness of the event quickly influenced her prefrontal cortex to calm the amygdalaes' reaction, similar to putting on the brakes.

As the initial shock wore off, and Judith looked across her desk at the damage, she saw a large soggy document on loan from a client that was due in her boss' office that afternoon. She noticed new irritation and, then fear coming up in her thoughts and body sensations. "I can't face him. I should act like I'm sick and leave for the rest of the day." When she detected these strong thoughts and feelings beginning to penetrate her nonreactivity, she laughed. Instead of judging her fear as wrong with a thought like, "I'm crazy to react that way," Judith joked to herself, "Oh well. Maybe, he'll hang us both out to dry."

Dan Siegel says that mindfulness practices "enable individuals to jettison judgment and develop more flexible feelings towards what before may have been mental events they tried to avoid, or towards which they had intense averse reactions" (Siegel, 2007, p. 278). According to Baer's study, nonjudging was strongly associated with a low occurrence of unpleasant psychological symptoms, including feeling neurotic, having difficulty regulating emotion, and avoiding experience (Baer et al., 2006).

Judith took a deep breath, grabbed some tissues, and mindfully began wiping the milk into the trashcan. Staying in the present moment, she noticed how cold the milk felt and enjoyed the sound as it sloshed into the can. While mopping up, she remembered that one of her employees, Nancy, was planning to have lunch with Jerry who worked at the soggy-document client's office. Judith immediately called Jerry. After milking the situation with udderly ridiculous puns, he assured her that it would be easy to bring a dry copy of the document to lunch.

According to Baer's study, acting with awareness, also known as "actaware," was inversely related to absent-mindedness and dissociation (Baer et al., 2006, p. 34). Rather than being distracted by reactivity or judgmental thoughts, Judith's mind focused on cleaning her desk and resolving her challenge.

Because of the three benefits of mindfulness - nonreactivity, nonjudging, and actaware - I strongly encourage leaders to develop a regular mindful awareness practice. Even if leaders spend only five to ten minutes a day developing awareness of the present moment, they can foster a state of mindfulness that leads to calm.

Feet & Seat is one of the most popular mindfulness practices I teach to leaders. They like it because it's easy to do, instantly relaxing, and no one knows they're doing it. To practice this technique, sit in a chair with both feet flat on the floor and your ankles underneath your knees. Notice that you have two feet resting on the floor. Lift your toes up slightly and wiggle them for a few seconds. Relax your toes. Focus on one foot. Scan your awareness through the bottom of the foot for a few seconds while sensing the pressure, temperature, and vibration. Repeat the scan on your other foot. Notice how one foot feels different from the other. Focus your awareness on both feet simultaneously. You don't have to catch every sensation. Just keep a general feel of your feet in your awareness. Take a deep breath in. As you exhale, let your feet be heavy and sink into the floor.

Next, notice that you're sitting in a chair. Move your awareness into the back of your legs where they contact the chair. Scan your awareness up the back of your legs, across your seat, and up to the point where your back no longer contacts the chair. Sense the pressure, temperature, and vibration in your seat. You don't have to catch every sensation. Just keep a general feel of your seat in your awareness. Take a deep breath in. As you exhale, let your seat be heavy and sink into the chair.

If possible, hold an awareness of your feet and seat simultaneously. You don't need to scan, just hold a sense of the pressure of feet on the floor and seat in the chair. If you prefer, you can hold awareness of just one, either your feet or your seat. Take a deep breath in. As you exhale, let your feet and seat be heavy and sink down.

Another reason I like this mindfulness practice is that a research study confirmed the effectiveness of feeling the feet. In their study, Singh and colleagues selected three people who were frequently readmitted to a psychiatric hospital because of anger management problems (Singh et al., 2007). They taught the individuals to shift their attention and awareness from any anger-producing situation to the soles of their feet, a neutral point on the body. After learning the feet mindfulness technique, the three individuals showed no physical aggression and very low rates of verbal aggression over four years of follow-up.

In addition to practicing this technique in silence every day, I also recommend that leaders apply mindfulness throughout their workday, particularly when communicating with others. For example, notice right now that feeling your seat has a calming effect on your body even while you are reading these words. My coaching clients often report that being aware of their body sensations or breath during a difficult conversation helps them stay calm, attune with themselves and others, and focus the conversation more successfully on their desired goal.

Even if leading is one of the hardest jobs in the world, leaders can train their minds to be more aware. Cultivating mindfulness makes it possible for even the busiest leaders to have a more effective and less stressful work experience.

Suzanne Kryder, PhD has owned a leadership training and coaching firm since 1992. Prior to starting her company, she was a manager in business and health care organizations. Her IPNB-based coaching model, *The Mind to Lead*, combines her 20+ year backgrounds in leadership development and mindfulness meditation. The article is adapted from her forthcoming book: *Coaching the Mind to Lead: Access Your Calm, Confident Power*. You may contact Suzanne at sk@themindtolead.com or 505.232.8433.

Leadership is practiced not so much in words as in attitude and in actions.
Harold S. Geneen, American businessperson

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