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## Mindful Leadership for a Sustainable World<sup>1</sup>

Leadership for Sustainability requires four succinct Mind Shifts

By Sander Tideman

We are constantly exposed to images of an unsustainable world, with lots natural and man-made disasters, such as financial volatility, social inequity, civil wars, overpopulation, economic uncertainty and depleting biodiversity and resources. While initiatives to improve conditions on the planet are plentiful, we cannot avoid a feeling of overwhelm and helplessness. Our governments don't seem really equipped to deal with the many global complex problems. We don't see much leadership evoking a compelling vision for the future. The media focuses on the tragedies that seem to erupt with increasing frequency. On top of that, the economic recession requires most companies to cut costs while work loads are not diminishing. This means, in other words, that most working people are being asked to do more with less.

Hence the tendency, among many of us, to feel fatigued, cynical, depressed or even burned out. Some of us, as a result of these emotions, become bitterly selfish. Their strategy is to carve out a window of wealth purely for one's own short-term hedonistic sake. Some wish to strengthen their country's borders, expel non-native immigrants and return to a reality of the past. What is the sense of all this? As our leaders fail to offer a vision for the future, can we ourselves discover a new meaningful perspective on or work, life and the world? Can we turn the disturbing reality of this world into something that evokes a measure of goodness and hope, which will get us out of bed each morning with optimism and vigilance?

Yes – and this may for some require a leap of faith – I believe that making sense of all this is possible. There is lots of evidence in recent research and real life to indicate that a positive outlook can be developed. Does one have to ignore the suffering we perceive externally in order to feel uplifted internally? Does one have to deny or suppress feelings of depression and replace this with optimism and hope? No, this is not necessary and in fact would not work. Denying the troubles we see in everyday news headlines is trying to fool ourselves. We have to work with what is real, or at least what *appears* as real to our senses.

This distinction between what appears and reality is often overlooked yet critical area for exploration. In fact, the most effective approach is to go to the heart of the matter: how 'real' is the world that we observe? How tangible is what we read and see, and how do these observations relate to our thoughts and feelings? Do we have to 'feel' depressed when we observe depressing facts?

It is at this area of inquiry where we are invited to work with what we see, our perception, that is our *minds*. When we start to explore the workings of perception and our mind more deeply we will discover that reality – sobering or distressing as it may appear - is not an external, objective

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written as background to my presentation at the Mindfulness@Work Seminar in Copenhagen on August 8, 2011, organized by the Potential Project.

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unchangeable fact. The reality that we perceive is an interdependent phenomenon dependent on many causes and conditions, including and most essentially the human mind. Let's have a closer look at the mind, the instrument that we use every day, the lens through which we see the world:

The human mind is instrumental in mainly three ways:

1. The human mind is an instrument of perception. This is the most obvious function that we use every moment of our lives, even when we are asleep. We perceive the world through our senses, which function on the basis of our mind. Next to the sensual consciousness there is the mental consciousness – the mind can perceive itself.
2. The mind is who we are. All our most cherished aspects of our personality, such as our knowledge, social and emotional skills, values, convictions, memories etc, are stored in our mind. We sometimes define ourselves in physical terms, but upon deeper scrutiny we all know that we are not just bodies: for we instinctively say “I have a body”. The holder of the body should reside within the domain of the mind.
3. The human mind is a source of creation. This has brought us incredible technical and scientific innovations. However, many of the problems that humanity now faces have also been created (consciously or unconsciously, through historical choices, ideologies, assumptions about reality and beliefs etc) by the human mind. This understanding give us an opportunity: since problems are man-made, they can also be solved by us. This creation is happening all the time: by observing reality we alter reality – as evidenced by findings of quantum physics, neuro-biology, positive psychology etc. We are not passive witnesses, but active participants in a co-creative effort that shapes realities. The mind can in fact recreate its own reality, even up to perfect health and well-being (in neuro-biology this is referred to as neuro-plasticity, in psychology this corresponds to the school of positive psychology and social constructionism).

This last aspect of our mind is often overlooked. Research shows that the capacity of the human mind is enormous. The mind's most amazing feature is that it can create meaning. That is, we can interpret reality (negative as it may appear) in such a way that it evokes meaning, motivation, and consequently unleashes energy, creativity and hope. For this to happen, we need to know how to work with our thoughts and feelings – for this we need to 'know' ourselves. We need to know how to work with our minds.

What is the mind really? As indicated above, the mind is a perceiving, creative instrument which shapes our reality. While there is no agreed scientific definition of 'Mind', I find the one coined by psychologist and neuroscientist Dan Siegel useful: “Mind is the inter-personal and embodied process to regulate flows of information and energy”<sup>2</sup>. Recent scientific experiments have confirmed what ancient contemplatives and top performing athletes have known for a long time: one can enhance and improve the capacity to regulate this process - we can train our minds. This is what we can call the practice of mindfulness.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Siegel, Mindsight, 2009

Mindfulness is commonly understood as a practice derived from Buddhism aimed at pacifying and calming the mind. However, while this true, mindfulness has many other aspects (and roots) that can be brought in so as to help achieving the various qualities of the mind<sup>3</sup>.

In the context of achieving a mind that can deal effectively with the challenge of sustainability, we can identify several levels of mindfulness practice. Each of these levels entails a particular Mind Shift, each built on each other and gradually expanding the capacity and scope of Mind. These mind shifts correspond to various attributes of leadership, so I have assigned leadership terms to the different levels. I have identified 4 succinct levels or Mind Shifts.

- Level 1: *Observing, relaxing the mind*  
On this foundational level one develops 'calm abiding' mindfulness, by developing the power to be attentive, focused and clear, while being relaxed and stable. Here one is discovering that 'self' is not the 'object', sense of distance between experience (thoughts, feelings and emotions) the one that experiences. In doing so, one develops a new perspective of one's needs: no longer does one need to 'unconsciously' seek gratification of those needs, one learns to accept them and find inner means to reduce their strengths. Reduce stress, improve health, self-confidence, and reduce identification. I call this '**Mindful Leadership**', which requires the first mind shift.
- Level 2: *Connecting*  
By becoming aware of own thoughts, feelings and emotions, and identifying less with them, one can more easily identify with those of others. No longer are one's own needs central in relationships, but a broader view of mutual needs arises which allows for relationships to become more reciprocal and compassionate. Becoming less 'obsessed' by one's own restlessness, agitation or irritation, one can better attune to the needs of others and in doing so, one become more capable in developing and maintaining relationships with others. Shift identification. This is the second mind shift, which I call '**Connected Leadership**'.
- Level 3: *Creative, evoking new realities*  
By having created some distance from one's immediate experience, thus relaxing the mind (level 1) and expanding the scope of the mind, including the perspective of others (level 2), one can create a perspective on the future, exploring intention, purpose and (better) alternatives to the current reality. Knowing that both mind and reality are changing moment-by-moment, one can discover opportunities for improvement in any incident. A dream about the future may actually be achieved. Since this transcends and includes level 2 (connecting), it empowers cooperation and collaboration. It thus forms the basis of team work and organizational effectiveness. This third mind shift I call '**Creative Leadership**'.
- Level 4: *Sustainable, Integrative*  
Once this new perspective has been developed, one can look for ways to actually create this future, by engaging others (level 2) into this creation, while maintaining balance and

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<sup>3</sup> In particular, one can find these aspects in the practice and philosophy in the Mahayana School of Buddhism, developed in the Nalanda Monastery of ancient India which was continued in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, which I have been trained in. But one can examples in other contemplative and academic traditions, such as the Academy of Plato, Sufism and the Jezuit order, to name but a few.

relaxation (level 1). Here all 3 levels are maintained. This type of leadership is distinct from most of the more conventional interpretations of leadership in that it, while being engaged in the world, firmly rests on the development of one's own mind. The inner and outer aspects of leadership are combined into one integrated practice. This state is quite literally expressed in the word Mindfulness – the mind is deliberately full with all aspects of the world that matter to us. We see the world in an integrated manner – outer and inner – so that we can be in the world with integrity. I call this (the fourth mind shift) **'Sustainable Leadership'** – sustainable here refers to both its external orientation of creating sustainability and internal aim to sustain one's mental and emotional development while being engaged in the world.

One's progress from each level corresponds to increasing levels of complexity: from focus on one-self ("I"), to focus on the relationship with others ("we"), to creating futures through collaboration in organization ("org"), to developing an integrated sustainable perspective ("all").

Likewise, each level expands the scope of the previous level. Level 1 is the foundation: here one is reducing the activity of the intellect, which tends to be overly stimulated in the modern world, and increasing the innate clarity and stability of the mind. One is trying to calm the mind by become more in tune with the space behind every thought and feeling, the 'being' level of ourselves. Once a degree of calmness, clarity and stability has been obtained, from Level 2 upward we will be working with the intellect again, but with more mastery and directedness, so that our minds work as instruments rather than as tyrants who boss us around.

At level 3 all one's needs are recognized and transformed – no longer does one contemplate compromise but seeks one transcendence. Sustainability requires ultimate creativity (and leadership) (level 3 and 4), based on proper understanding of shared needs. From 'shared needs' (Level 2) one recognizes a shared purpose. From a shared purpose, shared value can be created. Motivation cannot be purely selfish (level 1). Hence ability required to connect to others (Level 2).

A visual representation of these 4 levels of mindfulness/leadership is as follows:

