

## Mindfulness and Leadership

By Ed O'Neil, Principal, O'Neil & Associates

*"The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good." Ecclesiastes 9: 17-18*

**D**uring a coaching session I was asked a simple, but befuddling question: "How can I be a more mindful leader?" Such a good concern. I believe deeply that good leadership springs from being mindful. I have spent much of my professional life trying to understand how this becomes manifest in the ways we lead. But a simple answer to this simple idea was not at the ready for me that day. Often, we think of mindfulness as being a lifelong undertaking, and it is, but the truly mindful life always begins with a single first act. It can be confounding when it is thought of as a thing, rather than as a process that is never complete and always unfolding to new insights, truths, and depths. But describing a process is not at all easy. I also think that many who walk a path toward a more mindful life are reluctant to speak about it as this journey is intensely personal. But if these qualities are to have efficacy in the public realm it is important to bring them to that space. So, here are some preliminary thoughts on where the path begins.

**1.** I believe that mindfulness requires some type of **meditative practice**. This does not mean that you need to give up all worldly goods, join the ashram, or even sit on a meditation cushion. But to become more mindful will require developing a part of your inner life that allows for introspection, reflection, and a calming perspective. All religious traditions have a meditation path. The Hindu and Buddhist tradition are perhaps best known, but the Qabalah practice in Judaism, the contemplative Christian, and the Sufi path in Islam all include a practice of mindfulness that enhances the spirit. A meditative moment can be as simple as taking five minutes and bringing life back into a calming frame, but a longer dedication to a particular practice, one that might have been tested for a millennium, will produce a deeper capacity for mindfulness.

**2.** Mindfulness is also served by **containing the ego**, that sense of our self that engages and reacts to the swirl of the world around us. Separating ourselves from this noise and seeking true understanding is where much of the thought behind the religious traditions listed above and the heart of western philosophy since the axial age of Plato and Aristotle have been focused. All of the elements in this list are deeply interrelated and one of the reasons for meditation and contemplation is to gain such a hold on our ego. When this happens, we are on the path to self-acceptance, which is absolutely essential for mindfulness to emerge. The emotional triggers that can rule our days are no longer as sensitive and reactive. With this peace comes acceptance of others, a ready forgiveness, and patience. Each of these serve mindfulness.

**3.** A mindful presence is a **curious presence**. Most people think of mindfulness as a quality that brings us to understand and value others. And it is, but the curiosity must be conveyed in a manner that is other accepting, non-judgmental, and supportive. Such an attitude can only be conveyed by those that have the calm of a reflective mind and an ego that is not stumbling about in the conversation. Most leaders do not fully understand that they are more valuable with well-formed questions and careful listening than needing to know all the answers. Being able to be in the moment with others, to invite them into your calm and acceptance, is a valuable part of the mindfulness of great leaders.

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### Leadership Tips



*Leadership Tips* is an ongoing series produced by the Center for Health Care Strategies' Medicaid Leadership Institute in collaboration with O'Neil & Associates. The series is designed to provide general guidance to help leadership of state agencies and their senior managers develop and refine the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs. To view the full series, visit [www.chcs.org/leadership-tips](http://www.chcs.org/leadership-tips).

4. A **generous spirit** is a mindful one. Our culture, fed by ego, leads us to grasp and compete, measuring our individual victories to the detriment of our working together for collective goals. It also leaves us disconnected from others and fearful that we will lose something valuable. But generosity actually produces more gain, more security, and more of the genuine human connectedness. I have found that generosity and gratitude lead to a grace that reinforces our acceptance of self and fosters trust and openness in others.

5. Finally, and this is more of an outcome of mindfulness than a part of the path to it, is **joy**. Mindfulness opens the heart to happiness, celebration, and spontaneity, which leads to that most desired of human actions — deep fulfilling laughter. Mindfully letting go of judgment and accepting self and others lets us see the foibles that are inevitably part of our human life. Instead of being defeated by them, we see them for what they are the silly strivings of imperfect beings reaching for perfection. Once we accept our fate, we can turn what could have been remorseful tragedy into healthy comedy.

A path to mindfulness can make life richer and more fulfilling. But it takes practice, study, and dedication. There are many resources to help in this quest, but I've found these readings to be helpful on the five topics discussed here. While each is relevant to all five themes, they are arranged in the order of which topic they principally address.

#### Ed's Book Recommendations on Mindfulness

- *Mindfulness in Plain English*, Bhante Gunaratana
- *Comfortable with Uncertainty*, Pema Chodron
- *Buddha's Brain*, Rick Hanson
- *Humble Inquiry*, Edgar Schein
- *Give and Take*, Adam Grant
- *Servant Leadership*, Robert Greenleaf
- *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt

## About Ed O'Neil

Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O'Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (School of Nursing) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). At UCSF, he served as the director of the Center for the Health Professions, a research, advocacy, and training institute that he created in 1992. His work over the past three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit [www.oneil-and-associates.com](http://www.oneil-and-associates.com); contact Ed O'Neil at [herringoneil@gmail.com](mailto:herringoneil@gmail.com).

## About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. In addition, CHCS *Medicaid Academies* provide policy and leadership training for senior Medicaid staff as well as colleagues across partnering state and county agencies. Ed O'Neil has advised numerous MLI Fellows and Medicaid senior managers over the past decade. To learn more, visit [www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders](http://www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders).

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