

Most students love the buzzy, busy atmosphere of an MBA programme. But is it the right way to teach them the soft skills, particularly leadership, that employees say they want?

Dianne Lynne Bevelander and **David Bond** suggest that 'mindfulness' courses may be the answer





Good leadership is about dealing with crises in a considered rather than reactionary way. It is about responsibility and self-control and the ability to cope with the physical and emotional toll of high-level responsibility in today's extremely dynamic environment

Are business schools teaching leadership effectively? Some critics have argued that business programme graduates are too focused on the corporate bottom line, insufficiently concerned about broader societal implications and educated in a way that over-emphasises the left at the expense of developing the right side of the brain.

While not fully accepting the extent of the culpability claimed by their detractors, business schools have responded by introducing curricula innovations that further stress the development of holistic thinking and so-called “soft skills”. The expansion of leadership, social responsibility and bottom-of-the-pyramid experiential courses on both core and elective curricula around the world reflects this trend.

Several business schools are leading the way by introducing “mindfulness” courses and retreats into their MBA programmes. IMD in Switzerland, for example, offers a meditation and self-management course. Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, Netherlands, offered its first mindfulness leadership retreat in 2013. And Georgetown University’s McDonough School of Business in the US provides a six-week course on meditation and leadership.

Mindfulness courses do not entail spending extended periods sitting crossed-legged with arms outstretched meditating. Rather they are about helping participants learn to slow down and resonate with others. Being mindful helps in making choices with a richer appreciation of how these choices may be informed by our emotions and with a stronger understanding of the impact we are having on others.

These courses are about developing an appreciation that how we view ourselves has a significant impact on how we lead others and how others see us, which impacts on their preparedness to follow.

Mindfulness is about paying more attention to our emotional responses to circumstances and to our environment. It is about understanding oneself and appreciating the impact you are likely to have on others when making a decision or taking action before actually doing so.

Considerable scientific evidence exists connecting mindfulness to improved decision making, creative problem-solving ability, memory and resilience, among other things. Its inclusion in MBA programmes will therefore undoubtedly improve the development of the students and subsequently help imbue this way of thinking into the organisations they join and lead, benefiting the societies they serve.

Historically, MBA programmes have been highly intensive, interactive, and pressurised, with limited time to reflect. Going from one course to the next at a seemingly accelerating pace, students experience high stress, frequent assessment, concerns about immediate application of learning and pressure to secure graduate employment almost from the day the programme begins.

Mindfulness argues that we can achieve better leadership results if we reduce our instinctive tendency to run from one moment to the next and learn to slow down so that we take the time to think about ourself and about the impact we have on others.

The challenge for business schools is whether this reflective ability can be developed during MBA programmes and how (if at all) they need to be transformed to enable such development.



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In 2013, 15 MBA students from the Rotterdam School of Management, including participants from Global OneMBA chose the new experiential mindfulness retreat elective recognising that they were no longer going to be reading about leadership but actually doing it.

They travelled from Rotterdam into a stunning nature reserve in the middle of the South African Karoo. As the course outline describes, “this makes it the perfect environment to learn the unexpected value of mindfulness, slowing down, making friends with silence, nature and storytelling – to help you reflect on issues of core importance in your professional, societal and personal existence”.

Participants had access to electricity for only two hours a day. Only vegetarian food was available, no alcohol was served and no connection to the outside world existed. For many of the students who had only lived in a connected world, having absolutely no wi-fi was scary! But without electricity, the night sky presented more stars than many big-city dwellers could conceive and the sounds of nature proved to be unbelievable for some.

This begs the question: if they have never really experienced nature, how can they understand the impact that business has on it? More importantly, when they are in leadership positions that expose them to difficult choices, can they make a truly informed choice?

The answers, of course, lie in the understanding that experiential learning is more powerful and more sustainable than listening to a lecture. Experiential learning connects one to the purpose of the lesson in a visceral way. The way students learn is changing – educators and business schools need to catch up.

The retreat drew on ancient and modern leadership practices and was built on the assumption that today’s business knowledge and benchmarking is inadequate for meeting all of tomorrow’s challenges. Tomorrow’s leaders will need individual and collective capacities to sustain a values-based commitment to engage the world, to engage with the future as it emerges and to contribute to shaping that emergence.



Mindfulness: The ability to be aware amid the bustle of daily leadership and management – developed through a range of practices from disciplined meditation methodologies to various “in-the-moment” awareness exercises

The learning outcomes of the retreat were to develop participants’ abilities to:

- develop structures that nurture high-quality thinking
- build climates of trust that enable challenging conversations
- introduce brief “in-the-moment” centring and longer reflective processes that enable executives to “go slow to go fast”
- present a “prototyping” as an innovation tool for uncertain environments – enabling executives to “fail fast to learn fast”
- frame busy and challenging urban environments by tapping into silence, nature and the wild. To “sense and see”
- use “awareness-based action” that incorporates personal values that can be sustained across work and life.

Participants were taught through a range of structured, semi-structured and unstructured processes spanning three themes:

Mindfulness: The ability to be aware amid the bustle of daily leadership and management – developed through a range of practices from disciplined meditation methodologies to various “in-the-moment” awareness exercises.



Storytelling: Being able to craft stories of possibility for the future while being open to the dynamic shift in stories as you narrate them to others and as life flows forward. This is developed through fostering attention to the power of stories and enhancing students' abilities to shape and share them while appreciating the limiting assumptions and voices of judgement, cynicism and fear that might be embedded in them.

Silence: The ability to "make friends with quietness", to listen without responding, and have a calm non-judgmental "centre" that enables one to "sit in the fire" of a volatile, uncertain and ambiguous world and be open to whatever sound or sight next impresses itself upon you. This is achieved by being alone and remaining silent for periods of time in nature without the need to report back or have an anticipated outcome.

The first stage of the retreat was an initial period of connecting with the new environment and each other, coupled with a deliberate slowing down, to facilitate reflection and review of life and leadership journeys thus far.

It then moved to a "downward" phase that involved diving more deeply into purpose, values and intent – what is the story I have lived so far, what story is currently emerging for me and how do I want to craft clear leadership intentions into my story going forward?

The retreat concluded with re-emergence and re-engagement – what "ballast and compass" do I need to put in place to support the leadership story I have connected with during the retreat as I step into the uncertainty and turbulence that await me in the global workplace?

Participants chose the mindfulness retreat because of the opportunities it presented for self-reflection, personal development, and learning how to transfer the idea of mindfulness into practice within teams and the workplace. As importantly, they also chose it for the unique experience of time spent communing with nature.

Months after the retreat, graduates of the course consistently reference valuable lessons learned and internalised.

One participant spoke of how she previously rushed from group encounters and avoided speaking out in public and how the trusting environment of the retreat enabled her to develop an authentic voice and greater confidence. On returning to her leadership role in a management team, she volunteered for a key negotiating role in an important, high-profile venture.

Another participant spoke of a welcome re-identification with his personal and family values that is now guiding his emerging career choices against the pressure he felt to be a conventional "MBA career man".

A third participant reported that the retreat helped him "find myself after years of difficult circumstances... exploring my story has led to an inner stillness and new strength".

The relational dynamic that develops during a retreat of this nature brings out and encourages qualities that many of the emerging leaders had not experienced before. A growing sense of trust in each other emerges as participants lift the veil on their stories, just as it serves to substantially deepen self-trust.

Months after the RSM full-time and OneMBA participants completed their MBA degrees and began establishing their careers they continue to reach out to each other with emails, new stories, reunions and requests for support – important connections that sustain the learning and mindfulness intentions as the workplace demands attention. Due to its success and impact on the participants, the mindfulness retreat takes place annually as part of the MBA curricula.

Taking time to slow down, to reflect, to think holistically and to choose responses rather than react automatically in the moment will become increasingly important for leaders as our world becomes ever more dynamic and uncertain.

Systematically introducing mindfulness into business school curricula, particularly the post graduate MBA, will contribute substantially to developing leaders. Additionally and unequivocally, it will help address the criticisms levelled at business schools.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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David Bond is an international retreat leader, facilitator and executive coach, focusing on personal leadership development and courageous conversations. He's particularly interested in the use of radical presence, generative dialogue, mindfulness and storytelling to foster substantive change. He works across multiple sectors and within a number of top-ranked business schools