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### Mindful Women's Leadership: Empowering women leaders through mindfulness practice to make confident, ethical decisions in our mission-driven organizations

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

**Mindful Women's Leadership:  
Empowering women leaders through mindfulness practice to make  
confident, ethical decisions in our mission-driven organizations**

by

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Capstone Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Master of Nonprofit Administration Degree  
in the School of Management  
directed by Dr. Marco Tavanti

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## **Abstract**

Looking for ways to empower existing and future women leaders lead to an exploration of mindfulness as a practice to improve self-awareness and increase empathy allowing leaders to arrive at each situation with a balanced, present mind. This project proposes a Mindful Leadership Model which begins by looking inward, then shifts outward to the situation with an adapted situational leadership model that helps assess the appropriate response for different situations depending on the leaders response and the contributors readiness.

*Keywords:* change agents, conscious social change, mindfulness, self-awareness, situational leadership

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## **Section 1. Introduction**

This research began with a simple question: *What empowers women?* Humanitarian and musical genius Dolly Parton beautifully articulates the goal of empowering women through creating a legacy: “If your actions create a legacy that inspires others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, then you are an excellent leader.” My bias is clear, as a woman with leadership goals, this research was sparked by my desire to empower myself in order to empower the women around me.

Fueled also by current events in American culture, this research is closely tied to the ongoing Pandemic which has led large swathes of our communities to question traditional systemic approaches. Destigmatizing conversations about mental health is an effort more common now thanks to women leaders like Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles who have openly chosen to honor their health over their profession.

While the systems of our society experience this uprooting, dark secrets continue to be brought to the light. New York Attorney General, Letitia James, recently released the results of her office’s investigation into the sexual harassment allegations against Governor Andrew Cuomo. Exploring ways to empower women is necessary because while so much progress has been made, women are still experiencing workplace violence.

### **Structural Change**

Striving for inclusivity, the term “woman” is for all who identify as a woman either all or part of the time. These findings, however, are not exclusively for women. All people can benefit from empowering themselves, and all people can benefit from learning ways to empower the women around them.

Our mission-driven organizations benefit from having diverse thinkers from diverse backgrounds all tackling projects for the common good.

According to a 2018 McKinsey Report, *Delivering Through Diversity*, data gathered by 1,000 companies in twelve countries showed that gender and ethnic diversity increased profitability, and a diverse set of problem solvers often allows for an increase in innovation and business growth.

(Wiggins and Anderson, 2019)

In order to see a real change in the status quo, where women begin to lead our organizations and our communities toward social change, women need to show up for each other. As leaders, we can work toward making leadership accessible for all people who identify as women. This research aims to illuminate the ways women leaders are empowered through mindfulness practice to be agents of change in our organizations and communities.

The alternative to empowering ourselves and the women around us is business as usual, uplifting the patriarchy and maintaining the status quo. This leaves women and others vulnerable to imposter syndrome. Otherwise known as those intrusive thoughts of inadequacy that we so skillfully and so wrongfully support with false narratives.

### **Destigmatizing conversations about mental health**

When facing our imposter syndrome we might feel inclined to cover up what we view as flaws by wearing masks. We wear these masks to try and feel more comfortable in spaces where we are most vulnerable, and leads to miscommunication and mistrust. Imposter syndrome and masking are only a few of the adverse effects of not empowering women, and these two phenomena have vast implications for organizations, communities, and families. Before I can explain how mindfulness practice can help women get out of these situations or avoid getting into them in the first place, we need to have a deeper understanding of mindfulness practice.

Promoting resilience among existing women leaders is important because we know the value that experienced leadership brings to our organizations. Long term growth can be supported by long term leadership. Avoiding professional burn-out and remaining passionate and inspired have implications for personal and organizational success.

Asking how we can empower existing and future women leaders, considering the whole woman and all of her mental, physical, and spiritual needs, I arrived at mindfulness as a suggested practice for empowerment. This research explores opportunities for mindfulness practices to help leaders feel confident as they approach the many different decisions they come across. I hope to contribute to the conversation about ethical leadership through a gender lens.

### **Report Structure**

The report begins with a literature review which explores the intersections of women's leadership and mindfulness practices. The idea of conscious social change leadership is introduced by author Gretchen Steidle (2017), who suggests that we must work on healing our inner selves before moving to the outward situations. I compare this with Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model, which guides us to approach each situation in a way that is appropriate for both the leader and the follower or contributor.

This research includes four expert interviews with women leaders in mission-driven organizations. We discuss decision-making strategies and how mindfulness practice helps with identifying our authentic selves. Implications of this project include a proposed model for mindful leadership which moves away from the patriarchal models that exist in American society. I am proposing that women leaders - who are agents of change in our organizations and communities - are empowered through mindfulness practice to make confident, ethical decisions in varying situations.

## **Section 2: Literature Review**

### **Agents of Change**

In *Leading from Within: Conscious Social Change and Mindfulness for Social Innovation*, Steidle (2017) explains why becoming a transformational leader requires an investment in both inner and outer work. The inner work consists of the self which is made up of one's capacities, knowledge, and insights we cultivate as leaders. The outer work involves the world around us that impacts us in some way. Our inner and outer experiences are both dependent on and informed by each other. Our unique life experience is shaped each day when we engage with our external reality, process these interactions, learn, and grow.

### **Conventional Change**

Looking to make change in a conventional way is centered on the self. Conventional change can be one person making a change that affects just that one person. It can look like attending therapy for personal, emotional growth or making a commitment to being more active for personal well-being. Conventional change is also that which benefits the self-interests of a defined group in a community. This could be students advocating for student-loan deferment or a large corporation working to relax regulations.

While engaging in conventional change, we judge success on external factors. This can be equated to a traditional teaching model, where teachers implement rules and regulations for how the classroom society functions. In this environment, students look to their teachers for incentives and rewards for accomplishments, while avoiding the consequences of undesired behavior. Often referred to as carrots and sticks, conventional change relies on rewards and punishments from leaders whether its teachers or managers. The measure of good and bad often comes from cultural norms that have been deemed important by our society, things like status, education, material wealth, conventional attractiveness, or what we have come to believe is fair.

Though conventional change may ultimately lead from self-centered to wide-spread positive change, it will be slow and shallow and will not guarantee that all stakeholder voices are heard equitably. Conventional change does a much better job upholding the status quo.



## **Conscious Social Change**

A design philosophy and methodology, Conscious Social Change is focused on compassionate problem solving and solutions grounded in mindfulness and self awareness (Steidle, 2017). This process is led by *change agents* who invest in their own self understanding and personal transformation while striving to advance positive change for the common good. When one is interested in creating social change and they choose to deepen their self-awareness, they have a greater likelihood of making wise, ethical decisions.

Leadership is commonly measured by accomplishment, but it must also be measured by personal growth, self-awareness, and consciousness. This is what Steidle (2017) describes as leading from within. Most importantly for leaders who are involved in creating change, whether they are doing so in existing institutions or they are creating new solutions. Those of us who have been called to advance toward a more just society have the added responsibility of embodying the principles of integrity and justice we want to see in our world (Steidle, 2017). Our outerwork will reflect our inner work, and that inner work begins with mindfulness.

## **Mindfulness**

Defined as becoming aware of the present moment, mindfulness views whatever is happening with curiosity but without judgment (Steidle, 2017). It is a form of brain training and inquiry that allows the practitioner to increase their levels of self awareness through observation and experience. In order to be mindful in our interactions with the people and world around us, we first have to make space for mindfulness in ourselves.

## **Informal and Formal Practice**

This is not a comprehensive list of all styles of meditation and hardly scratches the surface of the nuance and detail involved in this ancient practice. Steidle (2017) simplifies the practice into two categories: formal and informal.

Formal meditation practices often uses concentration on a thing, for example breathing, and focuses the mindfulness on the self. Formal meditation can be conducted while sitting, standing, walking, and sometimes laying down. During this practice, we are building our concentration by bringing our attention back to the chosen thing again and again whenever we

notice a wandering mind. This mental discipline helps us clear our minds so that we can be observers of the bigger picture.

We can also practice mindfulness informally, as we go about our daily lives. This is a practice of bringing our internal awareness to our external environment, whether it is while we are sitting in traffic or listening to the birds outside. We can practice mindfulness in our conversations and in our interactions with others. Being aware of our internal and external environments at the same time can be referred to as “being fully present (Steidle, 2017).”

Being fully present isn't something that happens once and then you have achieved it; it's being awake to the ebb and flow and movement and creation of life, being alive to the process of life itself.  
(Chödrön, 2001)

After high school I started seeing a therapist, Jo, who helped me uncover some anxious patterns in myself. She was calm and patient and listened with empathy and gave me permission to feel all of those anxious, depressed - dare I say angry - thoughts as I processed through previous life events and saw connections to my current state of being.

Jo handed me a CD toward the end of one of our sessions; “I'd like you to try meditating.” The name Thich Nhat Hanh was written across the front in sharpie. I burned the CD onto my laptop when I got home and downloaded the tracks to my iPod video. It wasn't the first time I had ever heard a guided meditation or been introduced to the power of breathing, but it was the first time I was able to slow down and feel connected to the practice.

Hanh's voice was comforting and his guided breathing was structured in a way that I could follow. Starting by focusing on the in and out of the breath, Hanh would then transition to a topic like gratitude. Each breath in, he guides us to say yes, accepting all of the good, and as we exhale, we say thank - to the earth, to the universe, to the provider - for all of the good we so humbly receive.

### **Science of Mindfulness**

There is a growing body of research on the neuroscience of mindfulness and the outcomes of mindfulness practice on the brain. The brain conditioning involved in mindfulness practice

involves intentional, focused attention and awareness, which stimulates our brains, changing and strengthening certain neural networks. This contributes to our neuroplasticity, or our brain's ability to change and develop. Strengthening neural networks leads to the more regulated responses, emotional balance, and greater resonance with others (Steidle, 2017).

Research shows that mindfulness practice stimulates the middle prefrontal cortex of our brains. The prefrontal cortex is associated with integrative functions including self observation and awareness of one's own thought processes. It regulates our emotions and helps with our attunement to others. It optimizes our body systems, and improves our capacity for empathy and morality, intuition and insight (Seigel, 2007; Davis and Hayes, 2001).

### **Leading from Within**

Conscious social change works to understand the process of change that starts within ourselves and moves to our outer surroundings. The five key capacities of conscious social change as proposed by Steidle (2017) are as follows:

1. Cultivating presence: *What is happening?*
2. Becoming whole: *What is true?*
3. Ensuring well-being: *What is needed?*
4. Engaging mindfully: *What is helpful?*
5. Leading from within: *What is possible?*

These capacities for conscious social change are at the intersection of mindfulness and leadership. First, Steidle (2017) proposes cultivating one's presence, by asking *What is happening?* This is the first step to laying the foundation for a mindful response. The first step is to be quiet, calm, and become aware. Thoughts, emotions, and physical feelings are separate from our present experience. Thoughts may be daydreams or worries, they can be from memories of the past or anticipations of the future. Thoughts come and go in our minds in untraceable ways.

Most of us can name a handful of emotions, but have a more difficult time recognizing them within ourselves. Anger, fear, or embarrassment may be our triggered reaction to a

situation, and it is important to be able to name the emotion when it arises. Physical feelings, like pain or fatigue, are another experience that can take our focus away from the present moment.

In the well-known book of wisdom, *The Four Agreements* (1952), Don Miquel Ruiz teaches us about the Toltec. People of southern Mexico who lived thousands of years ago, the Toltec were a society of scientists and artists dedicated to exploring and conserving spiritual knowledge. Ruiz (1952) explains that although Toltec is not a religion, it does honor all the spiritual masters who have inhabited earth. Similar to the principles of mindfulness, Toltec knowledge can be described as, “a way of life, distinguished by the ready accessibility of happiness and love (Ruiz, 1952).”

That busy mind of ours that we discussed previously - trying to hold our observations of the present moment along with thoughts and emotions and feelings - is what the Toltec refer to as a *mitote*, or a fog. If our mind is a fog where each voice is yelling over the other, none of our voices are heard. Stopping to ask what is happening, helps clear the fog to enable us to decipher between our thoughts, emotions, feelings, and the present moment.

The second capacity of conscious social change as proposed by Steidle (2017) is becoming whole by asking ourselves, *What is true?* This requires a great deal of introspection, to really examine our own fears and limiting beliefs. Fear of failure will hold us back from taking risks, and our limiting beliefs are boundaries we set on ourselves. “Conscious social change invites us to examine our role in the systems, including dynamics of power and privilege that uphold the status quo (Steidle, 2017).” If we allow our fears to hold us back, are we contributing to the problem? To address our own wholeness, we must address our shadows. This will help us get to the root of our own experience, which will open us up to learning about the experience of others.

From this self-awareness comes the third capacity which is to ensure well-being. For this, we can ask, *What is needed?* This is where our inner balance will come in handy. Through our mindfulness practice, we are able to “fill our own cup” before filling others. By committing to our own personally transformative practices, we can reach a balance to avoid burnout and disillusionment. Just like we learn about our shadows, or fears and limiting beliefs that hold us

back, we can learn more about our own unhealthy coping mechanisms we cling to while we survive in stressful environments. Finding inner balance enables us to stay grounded and available for our conscious social change efforts.

The fourth capacity is engaging mindfully for social justice. Throughout this process we have asked *What is happening, What is true, and What is needed?* As we continue to diagnose the issue at hand and design a mindful solution, the fourth question Steidle (2017) proposes we ask is: *What is helpful?* The inherent wisdom of those we serve can only be harnessed by a commitment to deep listening. Honoring each stakeholder's perspective and insight and experience is valuable to understanding the whole system, which creates more opportunities for contributing toward the solution.

Finally, we are able to develop the capacity to lead from within by asking, *What is possible?* Conscious social change is a mind-set as much as it is a methodology. By committing to inner and outer transformation we are investing in our individual and organizational well-being. The more we are able to cultivate our self-awareness, the more likely we are to find our unique purpose and passion. This can enable us to be like a light-house for others, shining our light as brightly and authentically as possible, to inspire and energize and unify collective efforts behind a common cause.

We are able to ask this big question about all of the possibilities now because we have done the work to help calm our fears of the unknown. We can now take informed risks and think outside the box. Because we are confident that we are acting with full awareness of the situation, we can move with intention and integrity, holding a vision of a positive outcome, but letting go of what we cannot control.

### **Situational Leadership**

Once we have looked inward, we can look outward to the situation, to ensure our response is appropriate. The Situational Leadership Model proposed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard is a tool that leadership can use to measure the appropriateness of their response. "It is not enough to describe your leadership style or indicate your intentions. A Situational Leader

assesses the performance of others and takes responsibility for making things happen (Hersey and Blanchard, 1997).”

This model shows the relationship between the level of direction and the level of support a leader provides while also considering the level of readiness that the contributor exhibits. Starting with the level of direction, Hersey and Blanchard (1997) also refer to this as *task behavior*. This is how much the leader explicitly states what the contributor is to do, when to do it, where it needs to be done, and how the task needs to be completed.

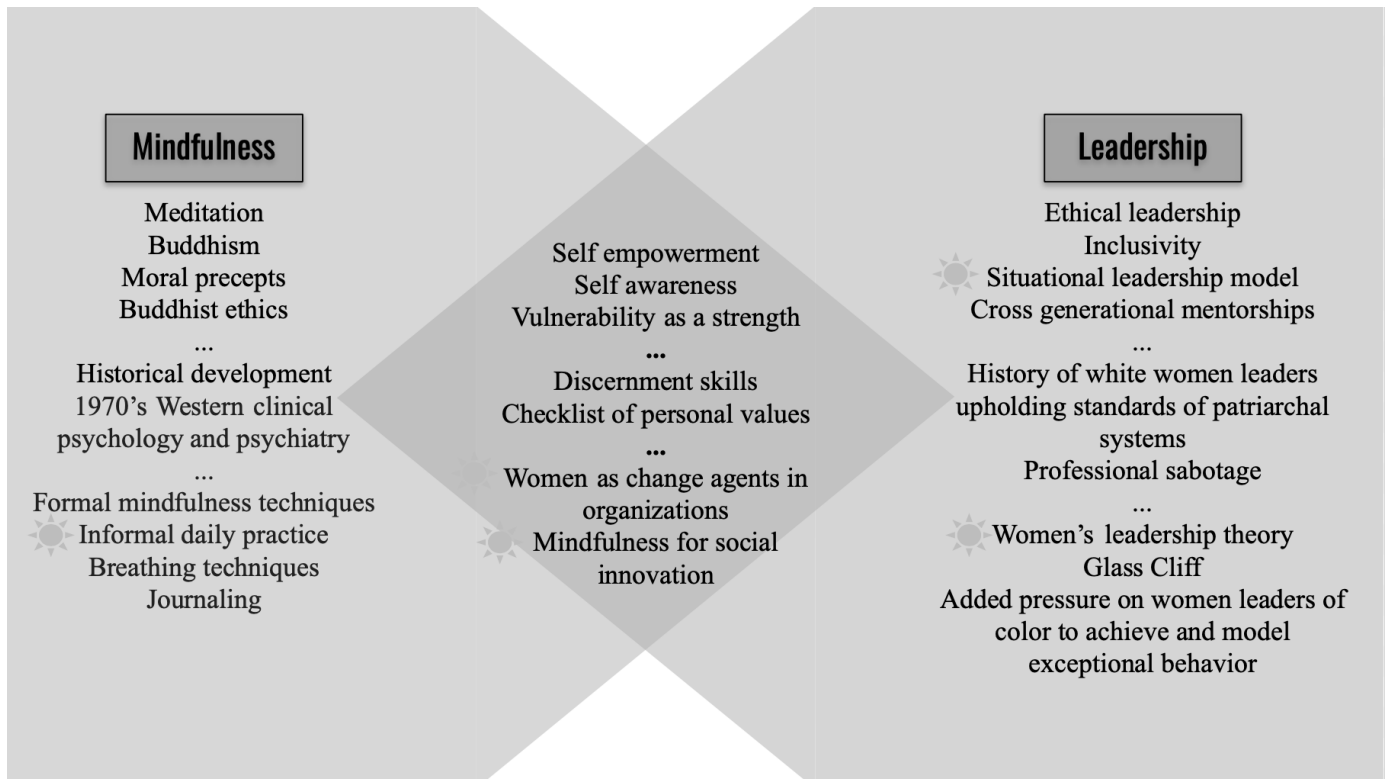
Next, the leader can focus on the amount of socio-emotional support to provide the contributor, referred to as *relationship behavior*. This is the level of two-communication the leader engages in with the contributor, by promoting socio-emotional support and facilitating behaviors. The final consideration in this model is the *readiness*, “the ability and willingness of a person to take responsibility for directing their own behavior in relation to a specific task to be performed (Hersey and Blanchard, 1997).”

As the contributor moves from low readiness to an above average level of readiness, it becomes more appropriate for the leader to decrease the level of task directives and relationship behavior. The goal is to prepare the contributor to be knowledgeable and confident and committed. When contributors feel the close supervision reduced and their delegated tasks increased by their leader, they feel confident and trusted knowing their leader has set them up for success and trusts that they will follow through. Recommendations for each readiness level are included in the implications section of this report.

### **Section 3: Methods and Approaches**

Along with the previous literature review, research methods in this project include four expert interviews and a proposed model of mindful leadership. The four experts are from various fields all involved in mission-drive work. The women are all in different stages of life and bring great wisdom and understanding to our conversations. It must be noted that I have a personal connection with each woman and hold a great level of adoration and respect for them. Topics which emerged both in the literature analysis and throughout the interviews are displayed in the following diagram (see figure 1). Unable to fully explore each topic that arose, I have included topics in this diagram that may not be fully covered in this report but that can provide a guide for further exploration for myself and others interested in diving deeper into these topics. Topics which are explored more fully are indicated by a sun.

**Figure 1: Emerging Topics**



*Source: Author's creation.*



## Section 4. Data Analysis

### Expert Interviews

During each interview, I asked the women to consider themselves in all of their leadership roles both personal and professional. I asked the women about how they make decisions and what their experience with mindfulness practice is like. Common themes emerged while each woman has a unique style and approach.

**Expert 1.** When approaching a difficult decision, the first expert (E1), starts by talking to herself. This is how she lays out the big picture. This introspective tool is useful for thinking about how each stakeholder will be impacted by the decision. This is why it is so important to not make knee jerk reactions. E1 describes how just saying yes to everything can put you in some difficult situations. Be honest and let people know you need to think about it, that the decision is important and you want to be thoughtful. “I’m a planner,” she said, and continued to describe how she is able to play out all of the different scenarios. There could be six different scenarios with six different outcomes.

The conversation began to turn toward mindfulness, as I asked E1 to try and connect her decision-making process and mindful practices. “I think it’s very connected, because it’s your thoughts. What are all your thoughts behind this decision? You can have a whole list but then you say, ‘Okay, what’s the most important thing that you want to keep or focus on?’” E1 goes on to describe an organizational example that she is currently dealing with.

A highly respected member of the organization’s community suggested E1’s organization offer scholarships for students to join a program that is related to E1’s organization. They are related, but have never been partners in any way.

“I want to say, ‘Have you lost your mind?’ First of all, we do educational scholarships for students continuing their education after high school, and no one from [related organization] has never done anything for [E1’s organization]. That’s what I think about automatically.”

She goes on to explain that she is learning that even in these situations, when she is sure of her decision, she will still take the time to think about it. “I’m learning to be more cautious with how I say things,” E1 explains. The organization has almost completely new leadership, aside from E1 who has stayed throughout multiple transitions. She is more open to new ideas now than she was in the past. She has been in a leadership position at this organization for two decades, she is embedded in the culture and her personal values are absolutely connected to the values of the organization. She knows every piece of the operation like the back of her hand, and has been in charge of running the entire operation for almost a decade now.

We continued to discuss how mindfulness helps in situations that are less cut-and-dry, where you need to look deeper into the scenario to find out more. “I have to dig a lot,” she explains, as she mentions the whole big picture. Even before saying ‘no’ to someone, she realizes she may need to ask some follow up questions. E1 suggests that sometimes we hear things differently, each person can hear the same questions differently, so it is important to follow up and listen intentionally when you receive an answer.

**Expert 2.** We began our conversation with mindfulness, as this was my main reason for reaching out to Expert 2 (E2). I was interested in her experience with formal mindfulness practice, and was eager to hear about a college course where she was introduced to the Science of Happiness. The professor is well-known in the field and associated with the Greater Good Science Center. E2 describes learning about the science behind mindfulness and following it up with certain practices like nature walks, breathing, meditation, and other mindful exercises.

I asked E2 what she thinks mindfulness means, and she responded ‘self-awareness.’ “Language is important to me,” she explains. “When I say self-awareness, that’s sort of the general umbrella term.” She goes on to describe being aware of her thoughts and how her body is physically responding to certain stressors. She describes her awareness of knowing when it is time to get up from her desk and take a walk, but also find herself looking for ways to distract herself from the stressors of difficult decision-making in her personal life.

This is where we transitioned into discussing E2’s strategies from decision-making. She acknowledges that it depends on the situation, and what everyone’s role is for making this

decision. She also has to calculate how involved she is in whatever thing is getting decided. She starts by asking, “What is really at play here?” She describes that she doesn’t take anything at face value.

“I’m sort of a strategic thinker in that way...I want to know, ‘what’s the bottomline?’ ‘Why are you asking me this question?’ ‘Do we actually need to decide on this now?’ ‘What’s the short-term vs. long-term?’”

All of these questions are examples of how E2 looks for deeper meaning as a first step to decisions-making. She wants to see the whole big picture first, then she can find out what has been done before to ensure they are not just reinventing the wheel. Once the scenario is mapped out, E2 can more easily see how her piece fits into the larger picture, while also considering how each possible decision will affect all of the stakeholders involved.

She continues to explain organizational examples where she inherited employees that caused her a great deal of stress. Their performance was low and she was in a position where she needed to document their daily activities. You also have to consider that these are highly trained positions. “It’s hard to replace these people, it’s hard to train them and bring them on board and get them knowledgeable with the particular business that we are doing, it’s not just a plug and play thing.” So now you have to weigh those options. There is a huge time investment made from a business standpoint and a personal standpoint. This is where E2 describes that you can not take yourself out of these situations, you are absolutely part of whatever decision is going to be made.

As our conversation continues, E2 also advises against knee jerk reactions. She talks about how quick band aid decisions are not the way she wants to operate. “I don’t want to solve the thing ten times, I’d like to solve the thing one time.

**Expert 3.** My conversation with Expert 3 (E3) also started with mindful considerations of how we fit in in the world and in our organizations. We talked about different unspoken rules in our families and at our places of work, and how we want to feel a sense of belonging wherever we go. We are searching for validation in our actions. She goes on to explain a difficult situation for

someone who does not have a strong sense of self worth. “If I tell you something like, I really hate your hair, now that’s gonna be your truth. If you don’t question my motives, I can crush you with the power of the word.”

This led to a discussion about the leadership roles within a mentor/mentee relationship. A situation we are both familiar with arose, where E3 describes the pitfalls of a colleagues mentorship style. This mentor has decades of experience in her field, she is passionate and creative and hard-working, but she is also difficult to collaborate with. She has a strong sense of what works for her and insists it will work best for all. “She did not look at [the mentee] in a way that emphasized what she was bringing. She was looking like, ‘how can I show my greatness through her, so it looks like I’ve given a generous gift.’” She goes on to explain that instead of looking for the nuggets of greatness in the mentee, the mentor discounts their experience and suggests her way. Instead, E3 suggests asking, *How can I encourage this person to grow and be her beautiful self?*

This is when we transitioned to a discussion about making difficult decisions. E3 goes to people outside of her organization to look for guidance and support. She describes her “most authentic and honest” friends who are not afraid to speak the truth. She also says that these friends are not going to tell her what to do. Different from the mentor relationship E3 previously described, these authentic friends give their most authentic advice without the expectations attached for E3 to take those suggestions.

Which is a huge part of being our authentic selves. Knowing what is best for us may not be what is best for others, but sharing our own thought patterns and suggestions as a way to further conversation and help stimulate each other’s decision making strategies.

**Expert 4.** This conversation started with leadership decision-making right off the bat. Expert 4 (E4) also goes to her trusted advisors. She explains that they will be different for different situations. “I go to who I think is the smartest in the room, who I trust, who I think will be fair, and who I think will give me an honest answer.” E4 emphasizes that honesty is the most important piece, which comes from having a trusting relationship with that person. “I’m looking for someone to be honest and to deliver the message so that I can hear it.”

Another piece to making the decision is being aware of the power dynamic between stakeholders. She describes a mentoring relationship she has with another member of her organization, “ [Mentor] is a great example. She’s right the majority of the time, which is awesome, but awful. She’ll come up with an idea that is not my vision, and I will do it just to please her.” This power dynamic can become toxic when advice is taken simply to avoid the backlash that will arise when it is not taken. This is what E4 means when she says you have to be careful of the power dynamic in these situations. When she ultimately has to make the final decision, she needs to be sure that she can live with it. She must be aware that others will be unhappy with the decisions, “but that doesn’t mean they don’t like me. Those are two separate things.”

It is important for E4 to see the whole picture and how a decision will affect everyone involved, and then separate the expectations of everybody’s reaction to that decision. She knows she has reached the final decision and she has gone through her “mental checklist.” E4 continues through her checklist for me:

*“Was I honest? Was I fair? Did I have integrity in knowing everything I possibly could to make the best decision? Am I doing this in a loving way? But a detached way? Then you’re confident. Then I’ve made the choice. I’m gonna go down this road. I am willing for it to blow up in my face.”*

Each of the four women I spoke with talked about the importance of family and how their role as a daughter has brought unique and difficult challenges. This role is a bridge between generations and has many difficult decisions to make.

The women all reference trusted companions who are honest and kind and they all made reference to finding a way to view the bigger picture. I was happy to hear how each of them differently yet so similarly described their own final checklist of values before making that final decision. Each woman invoked mindful qualities whether they knew it or not, when they asked themselves if the decision aligns with their values. Finding one’s personal values takes great mindful consideration and sometimes it takes having someone challenge these values in order for you to understand more fully why you feel this way.

## **Section 5: Implications and Recommendations**

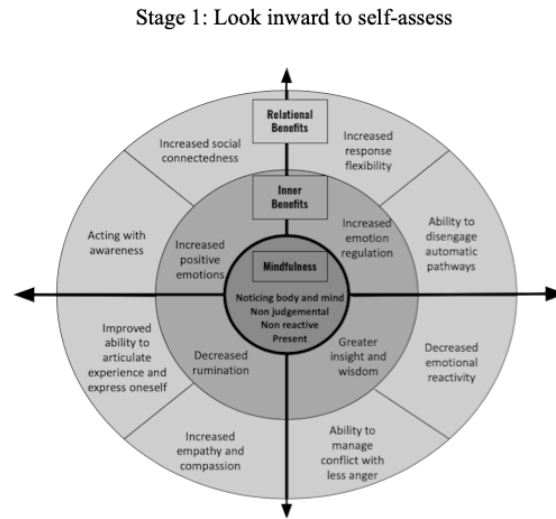
### **Move Away from the Patriarchy**

The implications of this project are to move away from the existing leadership models of our patriarchal systems, and toward a proposed Mindful Leadership Model (see Figure 2).

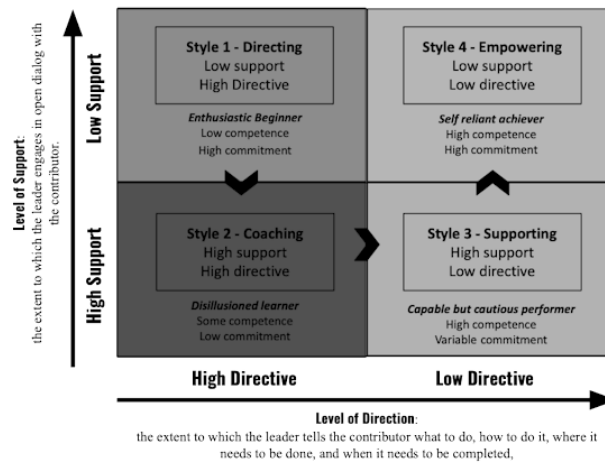
American society is built on systems that were made by and for white men. American individualism is focused on the self, but in a much different way than self-awareness. Our culture romanticizes the hero's journey and emphasizes personal triumph in a way that shies away from admitting personal weakness. Leaders are put on a pedestal, high above their followers, and declare things like, "I alone can fix it." Followers respond by doing what they do best: following.

If the leader has enough power, they can convince their followers to make great sacrifices by promising to take care of them. Promises are rarely kept by these leaders, who ultimately make decisions based on preserving their own power. As mentioned by E3 and E4, it is crucial to understand the power dynamic in any decision-making process. The mentors we have encountered who use their influence over others to showcase their own talents can cause harm to those whom they are meant to be supporting.

**Figure 2: Mindful Leadership Model**



Stage 2: Look outward to assess the situation for an appropriate response



Source: Author's creation.

**Mindful Leaders.** Having a sense of self-awareness means finding where your piece fits into the situation as opposed to centering oneself in the middle of it. The psychological benefits of mindful practice include increased empathy and compassion for one's self, which leads to increased empathy and compassion for those around us (Davis & Hayes, 2001). When we increase empathy for ourselves we are also decreasing judgement, we are learning where our weaknesses lie and accepting that we have opportunities for growth. We will in turn be less likely to project these judgments onto the people around us. Because our insecurities are no longer a source of shame, we can recognize these behaviors in others and decrease our judgement of them.

Mindfulness practice also improves our ability to articulate our experience. If I spend the time working through my emotions, looking for where they originate, I will be able to explain my own thought process to others. Modeling this process is a valuable learning experience for both the leader and the contributor. I have made a point to change from labeling them as followers because in a Mindful Leadership approach, collaboration is valued.

**Implications for Situational Analysis.** Mentioned by each expert was the importance of analyzing each situation according to all of the factors that come into play. In this proposed Mindful Leadership Model, the Situational Leadership Model (Hersey and Blanchard, 1997) has been adapted to compliment the inner work of mindfulness.

In a situational analysis, we can assess the situation for an appropriate response according to contributor readiness & leader input. The *level of direction* is the extent to which the leader tells the contributor what to do, how to do it, where it needs to be done, and when it needs to be completed. The *level of support* is the extent to which the leader engages in an open dialog with the contributor. As you move across the X and Y axis at different levels, you will find examples of appropriate responses. Four different styles of leadership emerge from this graph.

***Style 1: Directing.*** This is a likely place for each contributor to start in your organization. They are characterized as an enthusiastic beginning, someone with low competence but a high level of enthusiasm. For this contributor, a directing or telling leadership style may be most useful, where



the leader engages in mostly one-way communication, defining roles and giving instructions. Then leaving space for the beginner to work through challenges and make mistakes.

***Style 2: Coaching.*** As contributors continue to gain knowledge and skills, they may move toward what is described as a disillusioned learner. At this level, the contributor may have gained some competence but have a low commitment level to the work or the organization. The leader still does most of the direction at this stage. Acting as a coach, the leader will attempt more two-way communication and social-emotional support for the contributor. This can lead to more “buy in” from the contributor.

***Style 3: Supporting.*** At this level, contributors have an even higher level of competence specific to the organization, but are lacking the confidence to reach their full potential. This capable but cautious performer can benefit from a supportive leader who involves them in decision-making processes and engages in two-way communication to provide encouragement and support.

***Style 4: Empowering.*** This leads to the final level of leadership which takes on more of a mentorship role. This contributor is a self-reliant achiever with high competence and high commitment. The leader in this situation can delegate and allow for the contributor to call the shots.

**Collaboration.** Through this mindful approach, we can engage more collaboratively with each other. With deeper human understanding, we can impact systemic transformation, as opposed to relying on punitive measures that force change. When we are mindful, we approach each situation with less ego and avoid imposing our own agenda when it is not what is aligned with what is needed for the situation. We are able to more clearly discern the wisest response to a situation to ensure that we avoid harm and facilitate agency and connection.

When we have a strong collaborative community, we have a solid place to land when we fail. We are able to take informed risks and stretch ourselves toward innovative solutions. We are able to act with integrity, by “holding a vision for the highest benevolent outcome, but letting go of what we cannot control (Steidle, 2017).” Things we cannot control include other people’s feelings, mentioned by E3 and E4, or unprecedented events, like a global pandemic. Letting go

of what we can't control also gives us the freedom to be more flexible in our decision making. Allowing us to pivot quickly when needed.

### **Recommendations**

**Practice.** Surely it is no surprise that my first recommendation is to practice mindfulness. This goes for existing women leaders, future women leaders, and anyone who wants to be a mentor or an ally. It is referred to as a practice because mindfulness is an ongoing journey. There will be times when one is more secure in their practice and times when we drift away from it. The key is to keep trying and to look for what is meaningful to you. There are many different books on mindfulness practice, some of which I have referenced in this research. I have also included a table of tools and recommendations for mindfulness practice (see Table 1).

**Mentorships.** A healthy mentor/mentee relationship is one built on support for one another, and can be a powerful way for women to bring each other up through the ranks. These can be formally matched in your organizations or they can come about organically amongst peers. Mentorships can be safe spaces for women to learn about the unspoken rules of an organization and find closer connection to the culture. Intergenerational mentorships bring added opportunities for information sharing both ways, and creates greater understanding for all.

**Table 1: Mindful Tools and Recommendations**

Tools	Resources
Meditation	Thich Nhat Hanh, "Zen Master" and founder of <a href="#">Plum Village</a>
Visualization	<a href="#">Changing perspective</a> 1:16 in length, this video may help change your perspective on mindfulness, and perhaps inspire you to have a little compassion for yourself while you attempt the difficult practice of finding peace and presence and avoiding our need for perfection.
Youtube	<a href="#">Alina Alive</a> Content creator and spiritual guide, leads guided lunar meditations and provides journal prompts <a href="#">Nick Keomahavong</a> Practicing Buddhist monk bridging mental and spiritual health
Patreon	<a href="#">Nykita Joy</a> small content creator leads daily meditations, provides spiritual insight, and hosts a monthly book club
Netflix	If you have time for one episode, try: <a href="#">The Mind, Explained S01E04</a> , for some useful mindfulness science. If you have time for a full series try: <a href="#">Headspace Guide to Meditation</a> . Andy, the creator of the Mindspace App combines his personal journey studying mindfulness with powerful visualization tools and meditation practice.

*Source: Author's creation.*

## **Section 6: Conclusion**

One of the ways women find their inner power is through mindfulness practice. I began my journey with this hypothesis and found many reassuring pieces along the way. Women are able to work as change agents in our organizations, creating real social impact, when they are at their strongest. Women leaders need support from each other to thrive, and one way we can ensure we are showing up as supportive leaders is by practicing mindfulness in our daily lives. Finding ways to bring calm to our minds in order to see the bigger picture and avoid the blinding fog of ego. I feel empowered by this research knowing that so many women leaders like myself can use these strategies to make our most confident and ethical decisions which consider all involved, including ourselves. For those who do not come by confidence naturally, this is for you. Go out there and lead!

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