
Opening Personal Mindfulness

Leaders have to first embrace reality, then help others do the same.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Mar 01, 2016

Leaders interested in extending their Mindfulness have to open their vision beyond old perceptions. Mindfulness means calmly noting what's actually occurring now, rather than being mentally ruled by preconceptions.

I've frequently spoken about those leaders who complain about worker complacency; that when it comes to perceiving environmental or action-related risks, they should first look to themselves. Are such managers inadvertently but actually modeling or even exemplifying complacency? For example, do they take Safety progress for granted and dwell solely on shortcomings? Do they overlook the efforts and resources it took to achieve performance upgrades? Even adopt a shoot-the-messenger mindset when feedback sheds a light on we've-still-got-issues-and-aren't-as-great-as-we'd-like-to-think? These are all limiting mindsets at diametrical poles to Mindful acceptance of "What's happening this moment?" and "What's even incrementally changed from my last scan?"

Experience has shown most leaders default toward approaching "Mindfulness" or "Awareness" as a half-empty examination of what's wrong, limiting, or dangerous. But in addition to protectively noting potentially unsafe conditions and actions, Mindful leaders should further expand their awareness to also see the other side, the unique strengths of their processes and of their organizations' members.

Anil Mathur is President and CEO of Alaska Tanker Company (ATC) and a recognized force for Safety. This month, he distributed his annual letter overviewing the current state of ATC's Safety journey. "20 million man-hours at ATC (14 years) with only 1 lost time injury (a fractured finger) . . . carried over 1¼ billion barrels of Alaskan crude oil (1/3rd of Alaska's North Slope crude oil) without spilling a single drop to sea. ATC has transitioned from a company focusing solely on rules and discipline; to teamwork; to installing the engine that drives this extraordinary level of

motivation in the heart of each employee."

Perhaps because ATC has progressed toward encouraging practical Mindfulness, Anil frequently speaks about the difference between *knowing* Safety and *knowing about* Safety. He's really referring to people being in tune with current risk reality vs. just intellectually thinking they know about actual conditions, risks, and worker reactions. This comes down to the disparity between Mindfully sensing and the false assumption that, as a leader, you know what's really going on—when, in fact, you only have distant assumptions, ideas, or superficial understanding. The leader's first stride toward improvement is founded on the humble acceptance that he/she only *knows about* but doesn't really *know* what's going on with those simultaneously performing daily tasks as safely and speedily as possible. Next leadership step? Spending time open-mindedly listening and dispassionately observing, rather than preconceivably assuming what they do and what workplace Safety is all about.

The contrast between "knowing" and "knowing about" hit me on a personal level just recently when my mother passed away from cancer. From growing up wending through many conflicts between her strong-minded views and my own rebelliousness, I thought I knew who she was and had her strengths and limitations well pegged—with admittedly very clear emphasis on her weaknesses. However, I discovered that, while I knew of many characteristics and anecdotes (that not-so-coincidentally reinforced my view of her), I didn't know who she fully was as a total person, outside of just being "my mother."

When I traveled to spend time with her in her last days—and then, a few days later again at her funeral—I was struck by the discrepancy between my stale mindset toward her and how others saw her. So many I didn't know spoke about her innate caring and kindness, of how some things she said or did were so meaningful, even altering the path of their lives. Others, for whom I well knew and had much respect as powerful change makers, movingly conveyed how much they were drawn toward her. In preparing her eulogy (likely the most difficult "presentation" of the thousands I've done), I reflected that I had often misjudged her intent and actions. (Thankfully, I was able to relate some of these "enlightenments" to her before she passed.)

Leaders have to first embrace reality, then help others do the same. So many people have self-limiting views of their actual abilities and potential for change, often based on mildewed or mold-encrusted perceptions implanted when very young. The fears and thoughts of an eight-year-old can still burn inside many—even though we've since experienced and learned much since then. Though leaders aren't therapists, in order to achieve substantive and sustaining organizational change, we have to find ways to help company colleagues progress

past passé perceptions that pull personal performance down.

So, I'm reminding myself to "Mother Mindfulness," to look freshly at those with whom I work and spend time, to see beyond my superficial and often antiquated assessments of their strengths and weaknesses, toward a more current/accurate/functional acceptance of who they are Now. Perhaps even more than being useful for getting things done, this also feels like a better way to live.

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