



# Becoming a Mindful Leader

USING SELF-MASTERY TO ACHIEVE BREAKTHROUGH SUCCESS

BY JEFF MILLER



## Introduction

In work and life, how you perceive situations can be heavily influenced by your own self-perception. Proper “situational awareness” can set you up to make decisions that result in positive, productive relationships with colleagues, customers, friends and family. However, gaps in self-perception can have the opposite effect — creating situations where conflict is the norm, relationships suffer, and performance doesn’t meet expectations.

When perception gaps start to become endemic in corporate culture, organizations and departments operate in silos with communication and collaboration breaking down. The cause, in most instances, is not knowingly malicious or spiteful behavior on the part of CEOs, managers or employees, but more likely people not fully mindful of their actions and behaviors. Specifically, they could be operating with a mindset of “scarcity” rather than “abundance,” but not be fully aware they are doing so. A scarcity mindset is one in which every interaction is perceived as a zero-sum proposition, where the bottom line is about surviving as opposed to thriving. This creates an atmosphere of mistrust resulting in conflict rather than accord. Contrastingly, an abundance mindset is one of overcoming any obstacle or problem, with the motivation and behavior always being to create win-win solutions and results.

Closing the awareness gap starts with focusing on individual self-perception and self-limiting beliefs. By using a methodology of mindful leadership, we believe leaders and organizations can start to knock down silos within organizations and create cultures of abundance, where individuals will find greater purpose that leads to breakthrough performance.

In this paper we take you through the three-step journey to mindful leadership: 1) self-awareness, 2) self-empowerment, and 3) mindful leadership. In helping to guide my clients through this journey, I have seen managers operating in survival mode transform into leaders who excel and thrive in work and in life.

## The Mindful Leader

### Mindlessness vs Mindful

Let’s begin with a working definition of what it means to be mindful. Mindfulness may conjure images of quiet meditation, legs crossed, palms upward and a barely audible *ohhmm* sound slowly rising from deep within your chest. While meditation can be an important part of any healthy lifestyle, it’s not what we are referring to when we talk about being a mindful leader. According to Harvard professor Ellen Langer, who has been studying this topic for almost 40 years, mindfulness is simply the process of paying attention. By definition, this requires you to notice new things, to be present, understand and empathize. It requires being aware of your situation and how you are reacting to it. In fact, Professor Langer refers to mindfulness as the post-meditative state. This isn’t a new idea. The ancient Greeks understood the importance of mindfulness, as the philosopher Plutarch noted rather presciently, “what we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.”

Perhaps the best way to understand mindfulness is to think of its opposite, mindlessness. If you can imagine someone on autopilot, unconsciously plowing through the day, not aware of his or

her surroundings or situations in which they find themselves, then you have a better sense of mindlessness. Arguably the most harmful aspect of mindlessness is the impact it has on relationships with colleagues, customers and partners. Lacking empathy and understanding, the mindless person often has unproductive or even contentious relationships with other people. They're simply not present in their environment. Their reaction is often blame, excuses or denial when a deal is lost, deadline missed or product launch fails. I call this below-the-line behavior. Or, perhaps it may be easier to remember as "below-the-belt." Conversely, the best performers I see constantly exhibit "above-the-line" behavior: displaying traits such as ownership, accountability and responsibility.

Frankly, we all operate in mindless mode at times, wondering why we are not being as productive as we expected, not achieving the success we thought was within our grasp, or why we have lost focus and clarity. The late management guru Peter Drucker's observations on the difference between management and leadership provide a useful framework for thinking about the transition from mindlessness to mindfulness. Drawing a distinction between the two, he observed that, "management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing." However, understanding the "right" thing to do may not be readily apparent — you may need to consciously take stock and reevaluate. It's at this point where mindfulness plays a key role in helping to take you from a manager to leader mindset. While the role of management is important and can't be underestimated, the focus here is on leadership and its impact.

Beginning with **self-awareness**, mindfulness serves as your compass, or internal GPS system, that constantly re-directs you when you stray off the path that keeps you above the line.

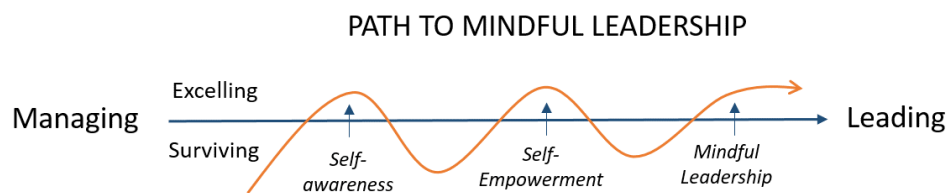
This path takes you through **self-empowerment**, where you begin to turn self-awareness into daily habits and practices that serve as guardrails keeping you aligned. Once you have honed the methods of self-empowerment, you are now prepared to engage in **mindful leadership**. You begin to lead by example — teaching, guiding and mentoring others until the methodology becomes embedded in your organization's culture. It is important to note, as Chris Lowney observed in his book, *Heroic Leadership*, that leadership is not reserved for executives running large corporations, or for that matter relevant to just a work environment. His point was that we can be leaders in everything we do, in all our interactions with family, friends and neighbors.

This is an important concept as you contemplate work/life balance, a notion which implies that you are essentially a separate person in work and life. Ellen Langer addresses this powerfully in her work with companies and executives. According to Langer, work/life balance plays into the fallacy that we need to be different people in different situations. Who we are as a person, as a parent, as a professional, as husband or wife. Lots of hats, lots of tension, lots of conflict. Think about balancing on a high wire. It's hard, strains lots of muscles, and is awfully precarious. If I am able to live a life of mindfulness and awareness, then it becomes about integrating who I am, not balancing different roles. I stay the same — it is the environment that changes. Of course, there are adjustments that need to be made. But it is a lot less stressful than balancing. In this sense, you are the same person, exhibiting leadership and above-the-line behavior in a variety of contexts. There isn't a separate you.

## Self-Awareness

Over the years, I have worked with many business owners, entrepreneurs, and executives that at some point experience a slow down or significant drop in business. Often they will describe the feeling of “hitting a wall,” where everything they do to shore up sales or stem the outflow of talent doesn’t seem to work. They feel like they are merely surviving, not excelling. It’s not a matter of them suddenly being robbed of their intellect or business acumen. What’s lacking is their ability to clearly, and without personal bias, understand the underlying problem. This requires noticing things that perhaps they didn’t notice before. Being aware, being mindful. If you are on autopilot, you may not notice external threats such as changes in economic conditions or industry dynamics, or internal conditions such as a gradual degrading of the corporate culture, leading to high turnover. While operating “heads-down,” executing on the day-to-day, managers can miss the flashing “Detour” sign 10 miles back, signaling a major industry disruption ahead.

In hindsight, of course, all these internal and external factors become obvious. The question is, how do you gain better foresight? How do you become better at spotting these issues in time to actually do something about them? The first place to look for answers is in the mirror. If you are operating with mindfulness and are fully aware of the situation, you are in a great position to see situations as they are, and therefore make better, timelier decisions.



*Figure 1: Path to Mindful Leadership*

As Figure 1 indicates, staying above the line requires a concentrated effort, working through the steps to mindful leadership. The wave-like pattern shown in the graphic is intentional – you will on occasion fall below the line (we all do). When below-the-line behavior begins to creep in, then a state of denial sets in, leading to either uninformed decisions or inaction. Self-awareness helps identify when you are below the line, which triggers behavioral change that helps you gain altitude, putting you back above the line.

## Self-Empowerment

Living a simple life of quiet contemplation is nice to imagine, but this is not a reality for most people shouldering multiple responsibilities at work and home. Self-empowerment provides the tools that integrate the contemplative practices necessary for self-awareness with the “doing” required of everyday life. This is accomplished by obtaining mastery over **time**, **money** and **knowledge**. These are the three pillars to self-empowerment, each of which must be actively evaluated and managed. You can think of these as your weekly workout routine — the equivalent of a comprehensive strength, cardio and flexibility training program. But unlike working out, where you may focus on just one area (e.g. yoga for flexibility) and achieve positive

results, with self-empowerment you must maintain a minimal level of “fitness” across the three pillars. The primary reason for this is that neglecting one area creates dead weight that drags down your overall performance and creates undue stress. Leadership requires you to be effective in a variety of situations and roles — integrating work and life. This is especially true for the entrepreneur or small business owner, whose life and work are intertwined and require constant attention on time, money and the development of new knowledge and skills.

### Time



Time management is a vexing issue for anyone with a reasonably complex life. Volumes have been written, and an entire industry has formed around best practices for time management. There is no shortage of seminars, videos and software tools to help you with time management and personal productivity. Many of these tools are indeed helpful, but I’ve found that a subtle change in mindset can have a remarkable impact on personal productivity. Rather than thinking about the issue as time management, think self-management instead. After all, time doesn’t change, people do. One way to think about this is to look at how much of your time you have essentially given away to wasteful distractions — five minutes here, and 10 minutes there. When you break it down day-by-day and add it up over an entire year, you start to get a better sense of the magnitude of the problem. Breaking this cycle starts with understanding your goals and purpose in order to help you prioritize your time and invest it wisely. It’s also embracing the reality that you cannot get back time — wasted or not. This is an essential first step before attempting to implement any system. You need to understand how you are spending your time now, and how you will reallocate it based on priorities.

### Money



There is perhaps no other area of life where self-deception and denial are as pervasive as with the topic of money and finances. This is true whether you are talking about personal finance or company financials. In either case, raising your level of self-awareness is essential for a more reality-based relationship with money. Setting goals and objectives is a pointless exercise unless you can measure outcomes and how they relate to your initial aims. Therefore, the first logical step is to determine what is important and set specific metrics to track progress. The problem typically lies not with the task of setting the metrics, but actually paying attention to them and, more importantly, making decisions based on what you learn. Building dashboards and key performance indicators that track the essentials of your business pipeline, profitability and receivables are an important part of the process. Having the discipline to stop, focus and pay attention to what they are telling you will make all the difference. Checking your belief systems about money will help you stay “above-the-line” and improve your bottom line.

### Knowledge



On the subject of knowledge and decision making, I think Mark Twain had it just about right when he said, “It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.” People in leadership positions often achieved their status by being the go-to person with all the answers. Clients and colleagues turned to them when faced with thorny problems, and over time an “all-knowing” perception can take hold. This can lead to a cycle where the reputation of the person among colleagues, as well as their own self-perception, are tied to always having the right answer. In a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world, this can lead to poor decision making when the knowledge perception and reality gap starts to widen.

In fact, leadership is not about always having the right answer, but demonstrating the humility to admit that you don't know something. This change in mindset requires leaders to seek out knowledge by asking the right questions and looking beyond their existing business or industry for insights and new ideas. If you challenge what you think you know, you are likely to find better answers in the most unexpected places. Leaders often reach a pinnacle of knowledge (sometimes referred to as unconscious competency) and when they do, they ask themselves, “What don't I know now?”

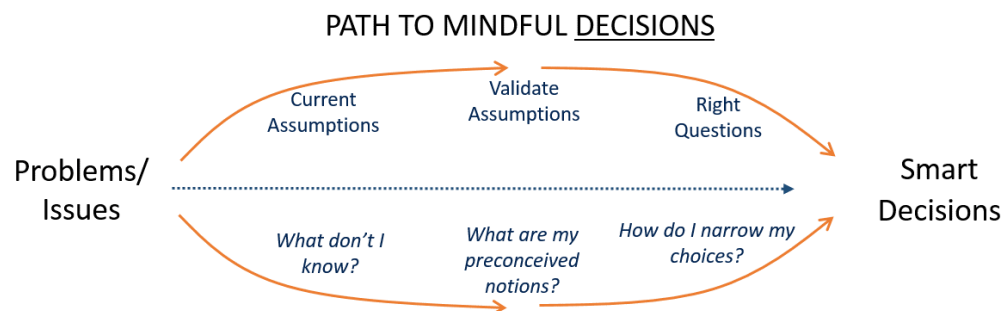


Figure 2: Path to Mindful Decisions

In Figure 2 you see a path using the old, “mindless” way of decision making represented by the dotted blue line: there is no attempt to understand/validate assumptions or ask the right questions to narrow choices, and therefore decisions are riddled with unchallenged guesses. Making mindful decisions requires discovering and validating a whole host of assumptions related to the problem you need to solve. Once you are mindful of your underlying assumptions, you then ask the right questions to narrow down your choices. This process leads to more thoughtful, smart decisions.

### Mindful Leadership

After having raised your level of awareness and applied the tools found in self-empowerment, you have arrived at mindful leadership. You are now in a position to refocus your attention externally to coach, mentor and teach the practices you have learned. Using your “above-the-line” behavior as an example, you can begin to change the culture of your organization by creating a common language and set of practices that will impact attitudes, behavior and ultimately performance.

When colleagues begin to understand the concepts related to mindful leadership, recognize below-the-line attitudes and have a set of tools and practices to correct behavior, the effect can be viral-like. The law of attraction comes into play, where certain people will be attracted to this mindset and behavior, while others will be repelled. It is at this point where you start to achieve greater alignment with your team and clarify your organizational mission. Another byproduct is that the culture of your company can become more distinct and meaningful with greater collective awareness and mindful action. The cumulative effect is a strong gravitational pull toward above-the-line behavior, creating an organization full of mindful leaders.

## Starting Your Journey

Your journey to mindful leadership starts with understanding your self-perception and self-limiting attitudes and behaviors. We discussed how mindfulness is a process you can use to raise your level of self-awareness so that you are in a better position to address these issues. Like any good process, mindful leadership requires a set of tools that will help you execute on a consistent basis — for your own benefit, as well as for others you will teach and mentor.

Over the years, I have developed a set of tools and exercises to enable this process, the key components of which are listed below. The Mindful Leadership Toolkit™ can be used to get you started on your journey. The process starts with a series of self-assessments that will give you a clear picture of your thinking style, behavioral traits and occupational interests. The remaining tools build off of the self-assessment, using exercises that match your values and talents as well as to sharpen your goal setting, decision making and team building skills.



### Mindful Leadership Toolkit

1. Assessments	2. Values and Talents Map	3. Goal Setting	4. Decision Making	5. Team Building
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-assessment</li> <li>• Leadership team assessment</li> <li>• Hiring and onboarding</li> <li>• Evaluating internal talent</li> </ul>	<p>Start working on what matters. Understand how your values and talents can work together.</p>	<p>Start with the end in mind. Get better at prioritizing and focusing by better understanding where you are headed.</p>	<p>Take a closer look at your decision-making process and determine where you might get off track.</p>	<p>Now that you've got yourself in shape, start to align your team toward shared goals and new ways of working.</p>

By taking this journey you will discover a life that is more productive, purposeful and less stressful. Time to get started!

[Get started on your journey now](#)



## Jeff Miller

### Founder, JM Consulting Alliance

As president and CEO of Jeff Miller Consulting Alliance (JMCA), Jeff has more than 30 years of entrepreneurial, sales and philanthropic experience. Through JMCA, Jeff offers consulting services focusing on small business development, sales training, executive coaching, non-profit board facilitation, strategic planning, and team building. Jeff works with clients to create systems of accountability, bring a refocus to goal setting, and build organizations that deliver measureable results, financial stability, and a better work/life integration.

Jeff strongly believes in the power of business and community and is very active in Montgomery County's business and nonprofit circles. He currently teaches workforce re-entry courses at Boyd Maryland's Correctional Facility, and is currently the Board Chair of the Corporate Volunteer Council of Montgomery County. He graduated from the Leadership Montgomery's class of 2014 and has served as past President of the Rockville Chamber of Commerce as well as Manna Food Center.

Jeff's unique best-practice services are tailored for business owners, executives, and nonprofit leaders looking to take their organization to the next level. For more information, visit [jeffmillerconsultingalliance.com](http://jeffmillerconsultingalliance.com).

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