



## Mindful Leadership & Conversational Capacity

*The Secret To Performing  
Effectively When The  
Pressure Is On*

By Craig Weber and Nina Cherry March 17, 2014

Few things inspire less confidence and provoke more fear than a boss who cannot control his or her emotional reactions. Since our inherent responsibility is building organizations that perform at their best, whenever we behave in ways that that makes it hard for our people to bring their A-game to the enterprise, we're failing at our primary job.

There are two reasons our impact has such a direct effect on our people: First, because we set the tone for the work environment and second, because our authority *amplifies* the impact of our behavior. Everything a boss says is heard through a bullhorn. Our behavior as top managers, in other words, is central to organizational performance; it directly influences whether our people will pull away from the hard work of building an effective organization or whether they'll lean into it.

Given all this, if we're to exercise more effective leadership we need to build our capacity to behave in deliberate and disciplined ways under pressure—to be less reactive and more intentional, less an obstacle to organizational performance and more a facilitator of it. There are two decisive competencies for doing this: *conversational capacity* and *mindfulness*.

### **What is *conversational capacity* and why is it important to the exercise of leadership?**

Conversational capacity is the ability to remain balanced, open, and focused on learning when dealing with difficult subjects and challenging circumstances. It's a pivotal competence. The tougher the problem we're facing, the change we're orchestrating, the

conflict we're engaging, or the strategy we're implementing, *the higher the conversational capacity we need* – in ourselves and in our teams – to pull it off well.

In any meeting or conversation there is a “sweet spot” where the conversations are open, balanced, and learning focused. It is in this sweet spot that the best work gets done. We know we're in the sweet spot when there is balance between two important things: candor and curiosity. We're sharing our views and perspectives in a clear way, and we're working just as hard to get the perspectives of others on the table in an accessible manner. When it comes to the sharing of ideas and information, in other words, the conversation is balanced. Maintaining this balance is easy when facing comfortable, routine issues, but under pressure people and their teams tend to fly out of the sweet spot towards the more dysfunctional ends of the behavioral spectrum. Some people drop candor and shut down. Others drop curiosity and heat up. So we have high conversational capacity when we can work in the sweet spot in difficult circumstances in which most people will lose balance and move out of it.

People in leadership positions have a huge impact on the performance of their team or business because their behavior can so easily affect people's ability to work in the sweet spot. Our authority, remember, acts like a megaphone that makes every word and action far more intense to the people who report to us. “An organization is a community of discourse,” says Robert Kegan, a professor at Harvard University. “Leadership is about shaping the nature of the discourse.” The ability to productively influence *what* issues people are discussing and *how* they're discussing them is a skill that separates an effective leader from an inept one.

Yet despite our good intentions, primal emotional reactions often trigger us into behaviors that push people out of the sweet spot. This is an important but challenging problem to recognize and manage. The powerful emotional reactions that send us flying out of the sweet spot – crippling our conversational capacity and that of our teams – are grounded in the potent fight-flight response. By boosting our ability to recognize and manage these tendencies, we increase our ability to balance candor and curiosity under pressure and to shape the nature of the discourse in a more productive, learning-focused way. Effective leadership, in other words, requires high conversational capacity and high conversational capacity requires a high degree of *mindfulness*.

### **What is *mindfulness* and why is it important to the exercise of leadership?**

If we are to better recognize and manage the habitual reactions that interfere with our effectiveness under pressure, a high degree of *mindfulness* is essential. Mindfulness is the ability to be conscious, present, and aware – of our own internal state, of the reactions and behaviors of others, and of the context in which we find ourselves in the

midst of action. With cultivated mindfulness we can do this even in hard, stressful circumstances, but with low mindfulness we'll lose our focus in even routine circumstances.

Practicing mindfulness, therefore, is an important leadership activity, for it allows us to notice our feelings and the knee-jerk reactions they can so easily trigger, and to make deliberate decisions on how to act. In his new book, *Focus, The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, Daniel Goleman puts it like this, "After some practice, you'll build a muscle that's strong enough to ward off emotional distractions." It stands to reason that mindful leaders can be more intentional and effective because they recognize when their emotional reactions threaten their effectiveness, allowing them to make more purposeful behavioral choices. Without mindfulness, leaders lack the ability to recognize and manage their reactions, which can lead to ineffective and even volatile behavior.

A rapidly expanding body of impressive research now demonstrates that mindful awareness has such a powerful impact on performance that it is being taught to doctors, psychotherapists, teachers, Olympic athletes, and even soldiers.

Given its crucial impact on leadership effectiveness, how do we develop our mindfulness? First and foremost, we need to learn to cultivate our "observer self", that part of our mind that is constantly watching our thoughts and emotions at work. Fortunately there are numerous ways to do this, including engaging in various forms of meditation, self-inquiry, yoga, tai chi, meditative running, and other attention-strengthening activities. If you don't currently engage in such a practice, we strongly suggest you look around for one. If you do have a mindfulness practice, keep it up. You're probably already seeing the benefits, and may recognize the need to invest in it even more.

### **What is the connection between mindfulness and conversational capacity?**

In our increasingly fast-paced, turbulent, unpredictable world, the ability to remain mindfully focused is an increasingly valuable skill. Leaders who develop this capacity dramatically increase their ability to be effective under pressure – and to help others do the same.

Our capacity for mindfulness and for working in the sweet spot are inextricably linked. We can't solve a problem we can't see, so developing our awareness is vital if we're to recognize and rein in the powerful tendencies that so easily separate our good intentions from our leadership behavior. If we're largely clueless about what we're doing in the moment and how we're impacting the people around us, after all, we have little hope of balancing candor and curiosity under pressure, much less helping others to do the same.



The key to getting the results we want in our lives and inspiring the performance we expect from the people in our organizations, therefore, is cultivating our ability to exercise leadership in a more conscious and disciplined way.

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**Craig Weber** is the author of the groundbreaking book, *Conversational Capacity: The Key To Building Successful Teams That Perform When The Pressure Is On* (McGraw-Hill, 2013). He's also the founder of The Weber Consulting Group - an alliance of experts committed to helping people build more resilient, healthy, and agile organizations. He helps an eclectic range of clients improve their performance by treating dialogue as a discipline. For more information visit [weberconsultinggroup.net](http://weberconsultinggroup.net)

**Craig and Nina** facilitates four-day retreats for executives, professionals, and organizational leaders on ***Mindful Leadership: Conversational Capacity and Strategic Implementation***. For more information inquire at [nina@ninacherry.com](mailto:nina@ninacherry.com)

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