MINDFULNESS-BASED STRATEGIC AWARENESS TRAINING

A COMPLETE PROGRAM FOR LEADERS AND INDIVIDUALS
Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training
Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training

A Complete Program for Leaders and Individuals

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The idea of writing a book originates from people I appreciate and admire. One of the first was my doctoral thesis advisor, Professor John Aram. At the time we were jointly teaching a master level course on leadership at Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. John thought I had a gift for simplifying complex theories and integrating diverse disciplines in a coherent, easy to understand, way. Over the years collaborators at work, students, and clients have confirmed John's view and exhorted me to put my reflections down in writing.

At the University of Saint Gallen, Switzerland, my classes on strategies to improve people's and leaders' decision skills leading to happiness stirred keen interest from the students and were always overbooked. Based on this experience I designed a one-year Executive Master program for positive leadership and strategy with positive psychology and mindfulness as the foundations of the curriculum. It is currently running in its fourth year at IE University, Madrid, one of the world's top business schools. The consistent application of positive psychology and mindfulness throughout the program makes it a unique training opportunity for professionals from a wide array of fields and industries. It is taught within a faculty that is composed of the best specialists in their respective fields, all pioneers in implementing positive and mindful approaches.

During studies at Oxford University for a Master's degree in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy it occurred to me that there was a need for shorter training formats like the well-recognized 8-week training protocols common to most mindfulness training courses. Maybe it was time to contemplate writing a book and make the material that I had accumulated over many years into a series of personal journals accessible to people outside academia—not a book about personal exploits, much less an autobiography, but a practical book enriched with human-centered, anecdotal data and with authentic stories that could illustrate abstract concepts and give them a human face. The drive to overcome my doubts and reservations and start writing comes from what I see occurring in the world around me, and I'm not alone in my observations.

In a recent article MIT professors E. Brynjolfsson and A. McAfee, together with M. Spence of NYU, a Nobel laureate in economics, suggest that one of the key
challenges in the future will be assuring an acceptable standard of living for the mass of people being squeezed out of the labor market by the forces of technology. Researchers at Oxford University estimate that in the future 45% of US jobs will be computerized, drastically reducing the workforce. Scientists such as Stephen Hawking also warn about the possible negative effects on social life that will result from a trend towards robots in the workplace that will threaten jobs on a massive scale. While writing these lines the Anglo-American mining company announced its intention to shed 85,000 jobs. At the same time huge numbers of immigrants pour into the more industrialized economies in search of better lives, although these countries are already under strain both socially and economically.

There are other troubles emerging, too. We watch in consternation the developments at FIFA, the Football Association, with its new costly head office in Zurich only minutes away from my home, as reports of corrupt behavior and arrests make news. We learn also how companies engage in deceptive policies such as VW with its diesel emissions scandal. Daily we witness, and hear about, the effect of climate change and its devastating consequences for the ecology of the planet.

These and other problems are already weighing on people's well-being and are likely to impact it even more in the future. An inevitable challenge for us all will be how we can confront these issues and work towards solutions. Some people may place their faith in institutions (government and business organizations) hoping that they will come up with appropriate solutions. My personal optimism is not with institutional solutions given the numerous conflicts of interest and the highly polarized context in which they operate. They rarely seem to get things implemented. My preference is for a personal, entrepreneurial approach, one that places responsibility for well-being directly on the individual. No-one can take the need for a person's happiness and well-being more seriously than the person themselves. Individuals and leaders will be required to develop inner abilities to help them to navigate through these demanding times that are increasingly being defined as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). This is the central thrust of this book.

I see a great need for individuals to cultivate mental, emotional, and behavioral qualities that allow them to make clear decisions during these turbulent times while maintaining a decent level of personal well-being for themselves and their families. For leaders there is the need to cultivate an awareness that allows them to create real value for many: not only shareholder value but also value for clients with good and healthy products and services; value for their employees so that their jobs are protected and new jobs created; value for society by making the appropriate fiscal decisions and contributions. This is a very big call but it is one that is required from post-modern leaders. Individuals able to attain these goals will be sought after and they will be worth the enormous payouts that accompany these positions. Especially in light of the poor record of managers and leaders investigated by Candido and Santos (2015, p. 237) "one of the most challenging and unresolved problems in this area (business strategy) is the apparently high
percentage of organizational strategies that fail, with some authors estimating a rate of failure between 50 to 90%. By failure we mean either a new strategy was formulated but not implemented or it was implemented with poor results.”

Today there are too many overpaid mediocre leaders with a flawed view of value who are only capable of reducing the workforce to boost profits or making shortcuts compromising the quality of their products and services in order to save costs when what is really needed is job creation and genuine products. In short they manage the profit and loss (P&L) statements of their business mostly from the short-term cost side instead of generating long-term sustainable, organic growth based on a strategy of revenue generation.

The ability to generate genuine value for multiple stakeholders requires a panoramic awareness that I call “strategic awareness”. It implies an open awareness infused with clarity of the mind, positive emotionality, friendliness, practical wisdom (in the sense of finding the right way to do the right things), and skillful responses to our socially constructed reality. It is the kind of awareness that allows for decisions that foster personal and social well-being while avoiding two of the most common errors in decision making:

- Errors in forecasting future personal outcomes of decisions taken today (for example, after being overjoyed with the promotion to country manager in Panama feeling unhappy with the suffocating heat and heavy traffic of Panama City).
- Lack of foresight regarding side effects or unintended consequences of their decisions (for example VW’s decisions that led to the emission scandal now affecting many other parties including the second-generation VW representative who lives next to me and his employees who are suffering a dramatic collapse in sales).

Mindfulness-based strategic awareness training (MBSAT) is designed to cultivate an open, panoramic awareness using mindfulness and positive psychology as its foundation and behavioral economics, cognitive therapy, finance, risk management, and system dynamics as supporting disciplines. Mindfulness, a millennium old technology of human development, has recently been receiving much attention as one possible way to help individuals cope with the challenges of postmodernity.

J. Sachs, the acclaimed Columbia University professor, speaks of eight dimensions in people’s lives that require mindfulness: mindfulness of self, mindfulness of work, mindfulness of knowledge, mindfulness of others, mindfulness of nature, mindfulness of the future, mindfulness of politics, and mindfulness of the world.

Positive psychology, the second pillar of MBSAT, is an already well-established applied science of well-being. It has developed proven interventions for assisting individuals to increase their levels of subjective well-being. In combination with the other disciplines mentioned above MBSAT forms a robust, comprehensive 8-week program that, if followed by the participants, can significantly improve the quality of their lives.
Considerable effort and care has been made to design MBSAT so that it delivers what it intends to do and doesn’t become one more program of what critics call “mindfulness McDonaldization” interventions, simplified approaches with promises of fast results, a kind of fast food for the soul.

The author of this book, besides having several years of mindfulness practice, spent two years learning how to design and teach mindfulness interventions at Oxford University and worked for more than a decade with applied positive psychology approaches to human development in various industries. Together with my many years of experience in organizational settings—as employee, leader, business owner, consultant, and teacher at business schools—this gives me a wide background that has helped me to design MBSAT. The course is the result of solid research findings and relevant practical experience. Likewise the book is written for a wide audience: for leaders and individuals alike and can be used as a guide for teachers as well as a manual for individual learning.

The result is a program built on the principles of scholarly design thinking. It provides innovative prescriptive forms of applied science with a vision of a mindful positive individual that can contribute to his or her personal well-being and that of others.

Instead of taking a theoretical approach and seeking to uncover how things are, it proposes an experiential learning approach with practices and exercises. At this point in the history of human sciences including mindfulness and positive psychology there are no reliable answers to the question of how things are anyway. What can be said for sure, however, is that the practices of mindfulness and positive psychology, when done regularly, are highly beneficial to the practitioner. They are not difficult, the challenge is to maintain continuity in doing them and that is hard as there are no shortcuts around this. As a sage once said: “Start by doing what is necessary; then do the possible and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

For those who practice regularly, MBSAT has the potential to generate positive, transformative outcomes for themselves and the world in which they live.
About the Companion Website

This book is accompanied by a companion website:

www.wiley.com/go/humbertoyoung/mbsat

The website includes Handout and Audio files.
Part 1

Foundations for Mindful, Positive Leadership and a Constructive Way of Life
1

The Quest for a Model of Mindful, Positive Leadership and a Constructive Way of Life

1.1 Groundwork for Models of Leading and Living

This book takes the view that human existence should not be compartmentalized. It is hardly possible to be a mindful, positive leader without being a mindful, positive person in private life. Being one without the other is an oxymoron. In fact, everything in life is shaped by the quality of an individual’s innermost attitudes and the quality of human existence. From that standpoint the content of this book applies equally to normal individuals’ lives as well as the lives of leaders.

Leadership can achieve great things like excellent products, services and dynamic organizations—all of which can make life more enjoyable and enriching. Equally, leadership can be used to damage human experience. Wars, group violence and many different forms of organized, or even disorganized, social destruction can lead to harmful outcomes. However, most of the time leadership is a process that simply sustains the status quo at organizational, group or even individual levels.

In this book I offer a model that, with training, can produce leadership that assists leaders and managers to create value in a positive and sustainable manner. I am particularly grateful for the perspective of the influential management philosopher, Peter Drucker, who defined leadership as “lifting a person’s vision to high sights, the raising of a person’s performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.” Consequently what I am advocating is that almost everyone involved in any kind of social interaction has the potential to apply this type of leadership.

For example, a mother helping her child to achieve higher grades in school and a colleague helping a team member with problems at work will both benefit from applying these leadership principles. It is a leadership style that produces workable systems within organizations as well as workable solutions for the leaders themselves as for any individual.
Over the years, both in places where I have worked, led and managed groups and at some of the best business schools in the world where I have studied, I have explored a wide range of leadership theories. (Please see Box 1.1 for a brief description of some of the most popular leadership theories.) Careful application of these theories has helped me to improve outcomes for my teams and myself. In terms of standardized measurements, such as return on investment, we performed extremely well. But I wanted to reach beyond standard measures. I was intrigued by the possibility that we could perform more creatively and avoid the emotional problems caused by chronic stress and fatigue. I knew this was possible because of an important personal experience in my youth.

Box 1.1 Leadership Theories

The plethora of existing leadership theories can be subdivided in four core orientations:

1. **Trait Theories**: These are theories that suggest that leaders must have certain personality traits or characteristics that people either have or don’t have. These leadership theories have lost their appeal lately and are somewhat outdated in the light of neurological findings concerning the plasticity of the human brain.

2. **Behavioral Theories**: These types of theories focus on how leaders enact leading. An early popular behavioral leadership framework was Kurt Lewin’s classification of leaders by their decision-making style. According to Lewin leaders fall into three categories: autocratic leaders (making decisions on their own), democratic leaders (inviting team members to participate in the decision-making process) and laissez-faire leaders (allowing people to make decisions within their own teams).

3. **Contingency Theories**: These theories suggest that there is no ideal leadership style as each situation requires a different type of leading. A well-known framework is Fiedler’s contingency leadership model.

4. **Power and Influence Theories**: These theories take the view that the key is how leaders use power and influence to get things done. A well-known framework here is French and Raven’s Five Forms of Power. According to Raven three sources of power are positional: “legitimate,” “reward,” and “coercive,” and two sources are personal: “expert power” (knowing your stuff) and “referent power,” stemming from a leader’s appeal and charm.
In my mind I can still see one of my father’s clients, a young businessman, the owner of a large transportation company dedicated to carrying perishable agricultural produce from the rural parts of the country to the capital, coming down the stairs in the office building as I went to see my father one day after school. He had tears in his eyes and was clearly moved, so I asked him what was happening? He answered that he was overjoyed, because his wife was finally pregnant after hoping for a child for years. He told me that he came regularly to see my father, his financial advisor. They had started talking together about everything, not just business, and this had helped to relieve him from the stress and exhaustion produced by long working hours and constant worrying. As a result he had become calmer and more relaxed and he was convinced that this had played an essential, positive role in enabling him and his wife to conceive a baby. He was so grateful to my father. I was only a 15-year-old teenager at the time, but I still remember that I thought “If only my Dad talked to me more often the way he talked with his client, Jorge.”

That story has remained with me because, besides illustrating how pernicious stress can be, it taught me something crucial about the importance of caring and loving relationships at work. I learned that there had to be a positive way of leading people so that they could develop and flourish. I simply didn’t know the “how” and this is what I set out to discover.

Here are the milestones of my quest. It is my way of highlighting the necessity of a model for mindful, positive leadership, and a constructive way of living with its integral parts. It is also a way to honor my teachers and all the researchers that have contributed directly or indirectly to the conclusions I have reached.

1.2 In Pursuit of Answers to Intriguing Questions

After years managing my own business and having achieved a respectable level of financial success, I felt secure enough to go back to the question: can we have better leadership and management models that benefit all parties?

In this search I studied for my doctorate at Case Western Reserve University’s Weatherhead School of Management in Cleveland, Ohio. There I met Professor Suresh Srivastva who thought of organizations as centers of human relatedness where people come together “to learn, to care and to grow, to love and develop, to cooperate and co-create” (as he often used to say during his teachings in class).

At Weatherhead School of Management I also met David Cooperrider, who had the inspiration during a consulting assignment for the Cleveland Clinic, together with Suresh (his PhD supervisor), to invert the question “What problems need to be solved here?” to “What is working well here and how can we replicate it throughout the whole organization?” By inverting the focus they both created the new approach, appreciative inquiry (AI), which is recognized today as one of the most important modern management innovations.
Inspiring ideas also came from other teachers during my doctoral studies. Richard Boyatzis was teaching about the need for leaders’ emotional intelligence and John Aram articulated the need to reform the management profession to reflect the needs of not just one stakeholder but society as a whole.

Also working in the field was Richard (Dick) Boland, my other thesis advisor and one of the early advocates of design thinking in management—a way of managing that was oriented toward creating desirable and creative, yet sustainable futures. Dick’s inspiration for design thinking came from working with Frank Gehry, the iconoclast architect who designed the avant-garde Weatherhead building, and observing his design methodology and working approach, which involved engaging the actual users of the building in the design process.

The experiences at the Weatherhead School of Management made a deep and lasting impression on me. It became clear that leading and managing well was not about learning and implementing the latest theories and tools on leadership and management but involved something beyond technicalities. Reading about the work of Albert Speer, the Minister of Armaments and War Production in Germany’s Third Reich, it became evident that good management tools were not the answer.

Speer explained how he employed advanced management systems such as ad-hoc democratic styles of management control and flat hierarchies. However, as we all know, these innovations were put to use for purposes universally recognized as immoral that led to crimes against humanity. This historic reality highlights how a leader’s qualities are a key variable for skillful and sustainable leadership rather than just great leadership tools and models.

### 1.3 Two Discoveries and their Importance for Good Leadership and Living

Inspired by the ideas and management philosophies I had learned at Case’s Weatherhead School of Management I started focusing on ways to improve management. I realized that management was a profession that needed to improve its standing with the public. Many people saw—and still see—managers and leaders as value destroyers rather than value creators.

Searching for answers I made two important theoretical discoveries: first, I became aware of one of the most complete models of human motivation, a rigorously researched theory called self determination theory (SDT), which had been developed by two eminent psychologists, E. Deci and R. Ryan (2000).

Second, I stumbled upon the evolutionary view of leadership (ELT). For me it was the most sensible theory of leadership. While most theories attempt to find a magic bullet that will solve all leadership questions, evolutionary leadership asks why we have leadership and what is its adaptive value, if any, in social behavior.
It is the brainchild of two scientists working independently, the Dutch psychologist Mark van Vugt and the German psychologist Michael Alznauer. It offers a strong theoretical foundation for the kind of alternative model of leadership and human existence that I was looking for.

I knew from experience that a robust scientific foundation was needed and that gut feeling was not enough. Sometimes individuals have intuitions about concepts before having a solid scientific explanation for them; a case in point is Marty Seligman, the founding father of positive psychology (PP). He explains how fortunate he felt when he discovered Barbara Frederickson’s theory of positive emotions (2003), which validated his intuition about positive psychology.

During his presidency of the American Psychology Association, Seligman had created the field of PP out of a sense of need for a nonclinical population. When he developed the idea there was no theory supporting the foundation of the discipline.

In the same way David Cooperrider started practicing appreciative inquiry (AI) without a supporting theory. I remember presenting AI in the early years of the discipline to analytically minded managers and when they asked me how the model actually worked, I did not have an explanation. All I could offer was that it was working and producing good results. The breakthrough eventually came with Fredrickson’s positive emotions theory. It provided the theoretical underpinnings for both PP and AI.

Based on these experiences I thought that if I wanted to present a leadership model I needed a theoretical anchor. As the late K. Lewin, the pioneer social scientist of MIT, used to say: “Nothing is as practical as a good theory.”

My joy at discovering self-determination theory (SDT) and evolutionary leadership (EL) was derived from the realization that they could enable me to answer two key questions about an alternative leadership model:

1. What makes people feel well in life? SDT could show convincingly that well-being results from the satisfaction of three human needs: autonomy, mastery and relatedness.
2. What are impediments to great leadership and why is great leadership so rare? EL suggests three barriers: a biosocial mismatch between modern and ancestral environments, decision-making biases and an ancestral, archaic tendency in human psychological patterns designed to dominate other individuals.

Taken together these two theories provide a solid theoretical framework: If we can find ways to reduce barriers to good leadership and enable managers and leaders to create contexts where people can fulﬁll their human needs and have good lives at work, then we have a good starting point for a mindful, positive leadership model.

Contemporary surveys in the United States illustrate how high the hurdle for good leadership is: 60–70% of employees indicate that the most stressful aspect of their work is the interaction with their immediate leader (Hogan, 2006). This is
almost as high is the failure rate of leaders in organizations—which is around 60% (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005).

Let us look now more closely at both SDT and EL.

1.3.1  *Evolutionary Leadership Theory (ELT)*

Evolutionary leadership theory argues that good leadership is essential for the effective functioning of societies and organizations. This is why leadership emerged in early human societies (e.g., in tribes, clans and extended families).

Furthermore ELT suggests that leadership is a task, not a trait or a skill, with the purpose of ensuring that the probability of success in a group is higher than they would be without a leader. Leadership in the ELT model involves setting direction, coordination, organization and the allocation of resources to accomplish group goals.

ELT (van Vugt and Ronay, 2014) defines three barriers that potentially inhibit effective leadership:

1. **Biosocial mismatch between modern and ancestral environments**

In ancestral times leaders were selected by their followers. Today, leaders are chosen by their peers (boards, executive members, etc.)—this inevitably results in modern leaders having a deep sense of loyalty towards their peers instead of their followers (employees, customers, etc.). Furthermore, in ancient times the task of leadership was distributed, as people were chosen to execute leadership tasks according to their skills. In contrast, today’s leaders are expected to perform all types of functions (being an expert in multiple areas: markets, products, technology, finance and organization, foreseeing future trends and generating innovative ideas, acting as coach in professional and personal matters, excelling in public relations, etc.), although most modern leaders do not have the broad set of skills required for such a variety of duties (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006). In today’s modern environment this mismatch applies to both formal, explicit leadership functions as well as informal, innocuous relations, for example in family, friendship, or sports teams.

2. **Cognitive biases and errors**

Evolutionary psychologists (Haselton & Nettle, 2006) argue that cognitive activities are prone to two types of errors: (a) type I errors of false positive (believing in a false belief) like thinking it is a harmless piece of dry wood when in reality it is a venomous snake and (b) type II errors of false negative (not believing in a true belief) like thinking it is a snake when it is in reality a harmless piece of wood. The consequence of making type II errors is mostly anxiety and stress, whereas type I errors can be fatal. Given this asymmetry of consequences, nature has adapted the human brain to err more on the side of type II errors (tending to assume it is a snake, not wood, to be on the safe side) to minimize type I errors. Inevitably this results in a very anxious mind. In today’s management environment these types of responses tend to be disproportionate.
Cognitive psychologists have identified specific cognitive biases that can lead to errors. These biases include overconfidence, group thinking, confirmation bias, status quo bias and so on. For a more detailed overview of frequent cognitive biases affecting business leaders and individuals, please see Box 1.2.

Leaders are chosen based on their ability to make good decisions and avoid errors. Aspiring leaders usually seek to project an image of competence and thus tend to succumb to overconfidence about their ability to make the correct decisions. Overconfidence can result in a number of negative traits including lack of self-awareness, inflated self-evaluation, defensiveness in the face of errors and ultimately failure to learn from experience (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). These weaknesses can have far-reaching consequences. Yet in the hierarchical structure of today’s organizations leaders’ mistakes are often difficult to trace and frequently have no consequences. The absence of punitive actions for decision errors creates a strong incentive to pretend confidence and seek leadership positions even when this competent image masks incompetence.

In ancient times, however, overconfidence by pretending to have competence was easily observable and the cost of mistakes was often fatal for both the leader and the group. Only people who were certain to accomplish the task had a chance of being selected as leaders.

3. *Human inherent tendency for dominance*

The third barrier identified by ELT is the psychological tendency, inherent in many human beings, to dominate others. In ancient times the dominant figure in the group was better fed, had a higher chance of reproduction and disposed of a larger share of available resources. But any potential excesses were tempered by direct control of the group of followers.

Today the dominance of a leader, which exists in leader–follower relations, is often characterized by a decreasing ability by leaders to empathize with subordinates (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi & Gruenfeld, 2006). The current concentration of power, normally at the top of the hierarchy, can lead to asymmetrical pay-offs between leaders and followers and, if unchecked, to imbalances in the distribution of resources (van Vugt and Ronay, 2014).

As the human species evolved from a life of survival that determined the form of leadership—mostly male, strong and tall as the best guarantors for assuring group survival—to a life beyond the needs of physical existence (at least in many parts of the world), more adaptive forms of leadership are needed. Our brain’s natural responses, and consequently the way leadership is executed, seem to be dominated by what neuroscientists call the “reptilian brain,” the oldest part of the human brain physiology. The reptilian brain has a predisposition towards attack and defense (fight or flight) and negativism.

Given the accomplishments of modern society, this archaic human proclivity needs to change in the twenty-first century, if people are to live their lives to the fullest.
Box 1.2  Cognitive Biases

Frequent Biases Affecting Decisions

Action-oriented Biases

**Excessive Optimism:** Tendency for people to be overly optimistic, overestimating the likelihood of positive events and underestimating negative ones.

**Overconfidence:** Overestimating our skills relative to others’ and consequently our ability to affect future outcomes. Taking credit for past outcomes without acknowledging the role of chance.

Perceiving and Judging Biases

**Confirmation Bias:** Placing extra value on evidence consistent with a favored belief and not enough on evidence that contradicts it. Failing to search impartially for evidence.

**Groupthink:** Striving for consensus at the cost of a realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action.

**Misaligning of Incentives:** Seeking outcomes favorable to one’s organizational unit or oneself at the expense of collective interests.

Framing Biases

**Loss Aversion:** Feeling losses more acutely than gains of the same amount, making us more risk-averse than a rational calculation would recommend.

**Sunk-Cost Fallacy:** Paying attention to historical costs that are not recoverable when considering future courses of action.

**Escalation of Commitment:** Investing additional resources in an apparently losing proposition because of the effort, money and time already invested.

**Controllability Bias:** Believing one can control outcomes more than is actually the case, causing one to misjudge the riskiness of a course of action.

Stability Biases

**Status Quo Bias:** Preferring the status quo in the absence of pressure to change.

**Present Bias:** Valuing immediate rewards very highly and undervaluing long-term gains.

**Anchoring and Insufficient Adjustment:** Rooting decisions in an initial value and failing to sufficiently adjust away from that value.