



Thought Leadership Paper

Nine Capabilities Employees Report Needing From Their Leaders

Mindful leadership is needed now more than ever. Employees need leaders who can lead through disruption and uncertainty. Employees need leaders who listen; who are compassionate, flexible, and transparent. Mindful leadership skills will be essential to leading through this next normal.

This is a difficult time for us all – a defining moment in history. Stepping up to the challenges and seizing the opportunities that lie ahead will require transformation at the organizational level, and at the individual level. Leaders will need to call forth and enact key skills and strategies. They'll need to build new capabilities.

What are these capabilities?

eMindful conducted a pulse survey asking employees what they most need from leadership right now. The bar chart below shows the capabilities that employees consider most important.

Let's examine each of the leadership capabilities in more depth:

Stability. The instability and uncertainty right now are palpable. Employees need a sense of stability and the strength to endure through these uncertain times. They need leaders who are intently focused on the current situation and

on opportunities that lie ahead for the company. They want to know that their jobs will be there to support them and their families.

While there's no guarantee that jobs won't be lost, leaders can offer perspective and practices that support a sense of stability.

Here are 3 recommendations to help maintain a stable work environment:

1. Set a schedule and encourage routines – this might be as simple as holding meetings at the same time each week or encouraging regular breaks to restore energy and focus.

2. Practice patience – while innovation is invaluable, it needs to be paced. There's a limit to how much change people can take on at once.

3. Empower your team – A report from The Military Leader recommends that leaders focus on the most important **30%** of decisions and let the team decide the remaining **70%**.

The months ahead will be challenging. Leaders can help employees see beyond the immediate reality to realize the temporary nature of this crisis.

By maintaining a calm and stable presence, leaders can counter the reactivity that's pervasive right now and is fueled by news reports. This requires steadiness of mind – a

way of being that supports one's self and others in feeling more solid and grounded.

Steadiness, calmness, and clarity are qualities that can be generated. Leaders can engage practices that support these qualities – such as pausing to take a breath and collect one's self before responding, a practice that trains the mind to be more stable and less reactive.

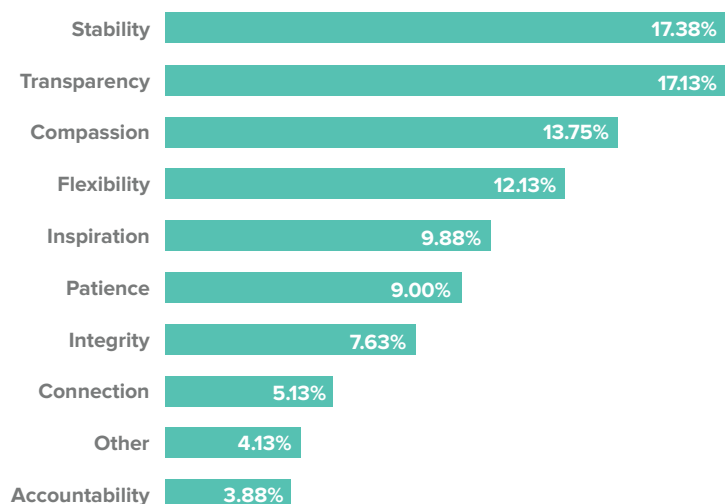
Transparency. Employees want the truth. It's through transparency that leaders prove themselves worthy of trust. Workers need leaders who are open and honest about the current reality – and not afraid to address issues like basic safety, job security, the financial impact of COVID-19, and the risks ahead.

Jack Welch said that effective leaders “tell people the truth. That doesn't scare them because they realize their people know the truth anyway.”

Transparency requires authenticity and courage; the authenticity to say “I don't know what's ahead of us,” and the courage to share the raw truth of reality.

Transparency conveys respect for employees. It enables workers to be more informed and thereby more empowered to rise to the challenges ahead. A basic tenet of mindfulness is the willingness to perceive and accept reality just as it is.

What do you need from your leadership at your company right now?



It's a way of being completely present to what's actually happening – even when we wish it were different. It's this foundation that connects transparency with truth.

Compassion. This is the time for compassionate leadership. People are experiencing fear and grief, confusion, anger, overwhelm and exhaustion. They need leaders who understand the distress they are experiencing; leaders who show that they genuinely care and actively support the wellbeing of their employees.

Harvard Business Review cites a survey showing that **80%** of leaders want to enhance their compassion – but are not sure how to do that. Compassion can be enhanced. It's a capacity that leaders can embody and call forth as needed, a way of connecting and responding from the heart. Compassion can be cultivated, for example, through a targeted mindfulness practice that involves the heartfelt wish for the wellbeing of others.

Leaders can demonstrate compassion by:

- Being fully present
- Listening with the intent to deeply understand
- Expressing empathy and care
- Offering support where they can

Compassionate leaders know that employees who are struggling need more support. Most people are hard on themselves. Leaders can encourage employees to treat themselves with kindness and care –especially when they're overwhelmed or fatigued or experiencing loss.

Flexibility. With reality shifting day by day, flexible leadership is crucial – not only able to adapt to change, but also able to steer through these stormy seas.

Leaders need to be clear on priorities while at the same time able to embrace reality as it unfolds; open to options and able to change course as needed.

U.S. Marine Intelligence Officer and mindfulness practitioner, Quentin Finney describes it like this: *“In combat, the ground is continually shifting beneath your feet and*

you have to have the skills to adapt to the new reality as it appears.”

His perspective points to the value of training the mind to attend to the present moment, responding to what's most needed right now with agility and skill. Targeted practices, such as those outlined in **eMindful's taxonomy of mindfulness skills**, have been shown to build cognitive flexibility. These practices equip leaders to meet challenges and opportunities as they arise.

Flexible leaders are also better able to support employees' wellbeing and the increasingly complex issues around work-life balance. Workers will continue to need flexibility around scheduling, working from home, and the possibility of additional time off as needed.

Inspiration. Great leaders know their people are their greatest asset. The power to inspire others is a key competency for leaders – critical for building an engaged and positive culture. As we look ahead to this next normal, leaders will be those who inspire and empower others and connect with their teams with their shared values and purpose.

Employees want to discover the good amidst the disruption, and to feel that what they're doing matters. Inspired employees are more engaged and more productive. In a study of over 2000 employees, the **Bain Research** group found that inspired employees are more than twice as productive as those who consider themselves merely satisfied in their jobs.

The researchers also looked at the characteristics of inspiration – traits such as optimism, expressiveness, and empathy. Out of 33 traits identified as statistically significant, 'centeredness' was rated as most important. Defined as *“a state of mindfulness, achieved by engaging all parts of the mind to be fully present,”* centeredness is an important enabler of the other skills.

Being centered is at the core of one's ability to inspire others.

Their report states: *“Our research shows that centeredness is fundamental to the ability to lead. It improves one's ability to stay level-*

headed, cope with stress, empathize with others and listen more deeply.” They also note that the ability to inspire is a skill that can be developed.

There are a number of targeted practices for centering oneself – most of which can be practiced on the spot and in the moment, as needed. The simple practice of bringing attention to the breath develops the mindfulness skills of awareness, focus, non-reactivity, and acceptance – allowing leaders to tap into their highest and best capabilities and to inspire those around them.

Patience. McKinsey & Company states that “the world is going to evolve fast. It isn’t about starting with the perfect plan: it’s about being on the fastest improvement trajectory. Bias toward speed rather than perfection; and the sooner you start, the better.”

While speed is critical for businesses, employees need time to adjust. Standard measures of efficiency may no longer be relevant. As priorities shift, the metrics will need to shift as well, for example, recognizing employees for their creative problem solving, for providing exceptional customer service, for their willingness to teach new skills to coworkers or to cross-cover one another.

Uncertainty and unease make it harder for workers to focus, and as routines are disrupted, productivity and efficiency decline. Employees need to feel that leadership understands. Patience can be thought of as an act of kindness – a quality that contributes to a supportive and caring culture, offering employees the space to recalibrate, refocus, and learn new capabilities.

By practicing patience, leaders are able to respond more thoughtfully and less reactively. For more on cultivating patience, and to see an example of mindfulness practice for cultivating patience (S.T.O.P. Practice), see Top Skills Employees Report Needing To Thrive In The Next Normal.

Integrity. Employees need to know that leaders will honor the promises they make and that they will treat workers fairly.

Integrity also means facing the truth even when it’s inconvenient or uncomfortable. It’s a type of

courage that allows leaders to avoid delusion, and to do what’s right.

Through his military experience, Quentin Finney developed a deep respect for the importance of integrity, and value of owning and learning from mistakes. His advice for leaders: “Step in and own it. Learn the lesson.”

Mindful leaders are aligned with the truth even when it’s difficult. They’re aligned with the shared values within the organization and able to move beyond ego to admit and own mistakes.

Connection. Human connection is paramount. Employees need to feel connected to their leaders, to the organization, and to one another. They need to feel that the work they do has value, that it connects with and contributes to something larger.

Research has shown that when employees feel a sense of belongingness at work, they’re more productive, motivated, and engaged – more able to contribute to their fullest potential.

Mark Williams, a former Air Force pilot with 25 years of mindfulness practice, offers his thoughts for leaders: “Check in with folks and get authentically curious about their new reality. And then encourage them to do the same. Why? To build trust and connection – the heart of a strong team.”

By practicing mindfulness, we are reminded of our deep interconnection with others and our shared humanity. The need for community and a sense of belongingness is vital – perhaps even more so in these challenging times. At **eM Life**, we connect people to one another and to a shared sense for purpose.

Click here to learn more about eM Life’s approach to creating and celebrating a sense of purpose for the world, and paying it forward to make a positive impact for good.

Accountability. Accountability means accepting personal responsibility not only for our actions, but also for our thoughts, feelings, and reactions – despite the situation or circumstance.

By modeling personal responsibility (along with a focus on results), leaders

can build accountability into every level of the organization.

Craig Hickman, author of *The Oz Principle: Getting Results Through Individual and Organizational Accountability* says that accountability is not externally imposed, but rather something that arises naturally when employees are fully engaged with a sense of personal investment and ownership.

He says, “A culture of accountability fosters self-reliance and confidence. Employees don’t need to be micromanaged when accountability permeates the organization. Rather than managers bestowing tasks for employees to belabor, an accountable employee sees responsibilities as challenges to meet and problems to solve.”

He describes that personal accountability frees employees to focus on the things that matter. “Engaged employees understand how their work is connected to key results, that what they do matters. When you communicate and reinforce their value to the company, you set them up for success.”

An internally-driven sense of accountability is especially important in this rapidly shifting landscape as employees (and leaders) are needing to improvise, devise new ways of working, and think on their feet.

Leaders will need ALL of these capabilities. And, these are not fixed traits. Each one can

be strengthened through targeted mindfulness practices. **Congressman Tim Ryan** – an advocate for mindful leadership in government and all realms of society – points out that mindfulness practice isn’t limited to sitting meditation. Some of the most effective techniques focus on the body and the breath; real-time techniques that can be woven into one’s day.

At any point in the day, we can take a moment to drop awareness into the body and feel the connection with the ground. We can move and stretch mindfully as we connect with the breath. We can bring attention to the feeling of sunshine or the cool breeze on our skin.

These kinds of simple practices are known to activate the parasympathetic nervous system – calming the mind and allowing us to rise to the challenges ahead with greater clarity and centeredness.

There is brightness to be found. Adversity can be a powerful unifying force. Organizations can emerge from this crisis with renewed focus, a clear vision, and new capabilities.

Leaders can step into their own strengths, galvanizing the qualities that people need right now, including stability, transparency, compassion, and connection. Through mindful leadership, they can inspire transformation.

To learn more about how you can build critical leadership capabilities, explore eM Life today.

