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## THE BLOG

# Resilience Through Mindful Leadership

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Bill George

Senior Fellow, Harvard Business School



Bill George

BILL GEORGE

The movement to develop mindful leaders in business is at a tipping point, as interest from corporations, educational institutions and the media continues to grow. As Arianna Huffington recently pointed out on CNBC's *Squawk Box*: "The tipping point was very evident at the World Economic Forum in Davos this past January, with many oversold sessions on the topic and meditation being taught by leading practitioners like Matthieu Ricard, PhD (a Buddhist monk who is the Dalai Lama's scientific advisor)." I witnessed this personally by leading a sold-out Davos dinner on the topic and participating in two other sessions on "Mindful Leadership."

What's causing this dramatic shift in our consciousness about what it takes today to be an effective leader? It starts with the changes taking place in the world. We live in an era of globalization and rapid technological change that is creating volatility,

uncertainty, chaos and ambiguity. (VUCA is the acronym created by the U.S. Military Academy to describe the world of the 21st century.) Its impact is compounded by the rapidly changing job market and the new 24x7 connected world.

This creates stress for executives and the institutions they lead. For institutions, the velocity of the business cycle and risks of the multi-polar global environment create instability. For individuals, the volatility creates more emotional ups and downs and can cause us to lose confidence. Amid such volatility, a reserve of mental and physical energy is required to be resilient.

As I wrote in my 2009 book, *Seven Lessons for Leading in Crisis*, resilience is the combination of heartiness, toughness and buoyancy of spirit. These qualities are necessary for leaders to persevere through struggling moments, bounce back from adversity and adapt to external stress.

### **Resilience in Action**

Many leading corporations — Google, General Mills, Aetna, Genentech, Target, and Cargill, for example — have created mindful leadership programs to build resilience in their employees. Google's and General Mills' programs are widespread through their employee base. Aetna's research on meditation and yoga has established their benefits for health and well-being.

To develop the new military leaders needed for a VUCA world, West Point has also created multiple training programs on resilience. These include spiritual fitness as well as master resilience training programs to bolster mental toughness, cultivate strong relationships and build on one's strengths — all qualities of mindful leaders. Martin E.P. Seligman's Harvard Business Review article, "Building Resilience," summarizes these initiatives.

Alan Mulally's turnaround at the Ford Motor Company illustrates the value of resilience. He became CEO of Ford in 2006 and faced week after week of challenging news about the business. As the financial crisis peaked, Ford's very existence was at risk. As documented in Bryce Hoffman's *American Icon*, Mulally maintained an upbeat, positive spirit and can-do attitude that transformed Ford. He applauded those who offered bad news and encouraged the organization to view setbacks as learning opportunities en route to success.

### **The Mindful Leader**

The best way to become more resilient is to develop oneself into a calm, compassionate and adaptable Mindful Leader. How does one become mindful? In 2011, I presented my ideas on authentic leadership to the Dalai Lama and asked him that question. He stressed the importance of creating daily mindful practices.

Two practices have increased my resilience and shaped my leadership. The first is meditation, which I began in 1975, twenty minutes twice a day. This has been the single best thing to improve my effectiveness and sense of well-being. Meditation enables me to forget less important events and focus with clarity on significant issues. My most creative ideas come out of meditation. In addition, meditation

increases my energy level and enables me to be more compassionate toward others.

Meditation certainly isn't the only way to become mindful. Other regular practices include prayer, journaling, intimate discussions and solitary exercises like jogging, hiking and swimming. The important thing is to have some form of introspective practice that enables you to slow down your mind and reflect on what is important.

Second, I have been meeting weekly since 1975 with a group of men to discuss our beliefs and life experiences. We serve as mirrors for each other, allowing us to maintain equilibrium under pressure and understand how we are perceived by others. In addition, my wife and I formed a couples group of eight people in 1983 that meets monthly for personal discussions. The format of these groups is similar to the Young President Organization's Forum and the small, intimate groups described in my book, *True North Groups*.

### **Being Mindful Makes You a Better Leader**

In my experience, mindful people make much better leaders than frenetic, aggressive ones. They understand their reactions to stress and crises, and understand their impact on others. They are far better at inspiring people to take on greater responsibilities and at aligning them around common missions and values. They are better at focusing and are more effective at delegating work with closed-loop follow-up. As a result, people follow their mindful approach, and their organizations outperform others over the long-run.

There is no cost to becoming mindful, and it makes far better use of your time. That's why it's catching on so rapidly. The tipping point is indeed here.

*Bill George is professor of management practice at Harvard Business School and author of *True North* and *Authentic Leadership*. He is the former chair and CEO of Medtronic. Read more at [www.BillGeorge.org](http://www.BillGeorge.org), or follow him on Twitter @Bill\_George.*

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