

# The Three Levels of Leadership

## Mindfulness Meditation Exercise

This exercise is reprinted from chapter 9 of *The Three Levels of Leadership: How to Develop Your Leadership Presence, Knowhow and Skill* by James Scouller

*Note: For the first two or three months it's best to build up your power of concentration before extending this work to become a full mindfulness exercise. Thus, steps 1-5 should be your focus in that period. Only add the later steps once you have gained some experience in holding your mind fixed on your breathing.*

1. Choose a quiet place to sit and make sure you are ready to work on this exercise for up to 15 minutes. Sit in a comfortable firm chair, ensure your back is upright, your hands are resting on your legs and your feet are flat on the floor. Now close your eyes and relax your body, allowing it to settle in to a natural position that's comfortable for you.
2. Then, as in the disidentification exercise, become aware of your breathing. Simply notice how your breath feels as it goes in and out naturally. Don't force your breathing, just let it flow and enjoy it.
3. Notice any differences between the in-breath and the out-breath. Don't *think* about the differences, in other words don't describe them mentally in words, just notice them.
4. When your breathing has settled into a natural relaxed rhythm, focus your mind on your breathing and notice the breath flowing freely in and out. And just keep your focus there.
5. Sometimes – and indeed often as a beginner – you will find your attention has wandered and you are no longer focusing on your breathing. Instead, you find you have been remembering something that happened the previous day, or you've been thinking about a task you have to complete, or perhaps you've been wondering if this is all a waste of time. Whatever you were thinking, you'll realise you were absorbed in (or identified with) your thoughts and didn't notice you had let your attention wander. This is normal. Don't worry about it. The four levels of your mind have a momentum of their own – especially the lower three – and aren't used to the discipline of being held in one place. So you will face resistance. That's why some people compare the mind to a wild animal. When this happens, gently bring your focus back to the in and out flow of your breathing. And if it happens again, do the same; gently bring your attention back to your breathing. Just keep repeating this sequence: focus on the breathing and when you notice you have wandered off, return to the breathing.
6. Now you add mindfulness to your concentration. To do that you simply have to notice whatever arises in your mind while you are concentrating on your breathing. It may be a thought, perhaps in the form of an idea, an image or a memory. Or instead an emotion.

Or a body sensation. Or an urge to do something. When that happens, feel pleased that you've noticed you're no longer focusing on your breath because that's mindfulness. Whatever it is that's deflected your attention, just note it kindly or on some occasions, with gentle amusement, and look through it to the space – the pure self-awareness in which the thought arises – behind it. So unlike step 5, you temporarily turn your attention to this mental event. But you don't *think* about it; meaning you don't describe it in words, get caught inside it, classify it or scold yourself for failing to concentrate on your breathing, you just observe. Nor do you judge, censor, deny or push away what arises; you just let it be and note it. Notice too how, having risen, it usually fades after you have noticed and looked through it. *TIP: In the act of noticing the event you may find it helpful to mentally note it with one (and only one) neutral descriptive word such as "thinking," "feeling," "image" or "sensation." I have found this helps develop mindfulness in the early months of practice without getting caught in the mental event.*

7. Once it has fallen away, gently return your attention to the in and out flow of your breathing. And when another inner event arises, note it without becoming absorbed in it, look through it to the pure awareness behind and watch how it fades away. And again, return your attention to your breath. Keep repeating this process for the rest of the meditation: concentrate on the breath, note any random thought or feeling, look through it, watch it fade and return to the breath.
8. Occasionally you may find a thought that doesn't fade automatically. Don't worry. Note it, look through it and even if it hasn't faded, simply turn your attention back to your breathing. That usually causes it to go. If it doesn't, repeat the cycle of noticing it, looking through it and returning to your breathing.
9. At the end, become aware of the pressure of your buttocks on the chair, the feeling of the back of the chair and the soles of your feet on the floor. Then open your eyes. You have completed the exercise.

### Questions & Answers

- *How often should you practise mindfulness meditation?* Regular, ideally daily, practice is the key and you can go on using this technique every day for the rest of your life. It's something you should plan to practise for years. Remember, self-mastery is a marathon, not a sprint.
- *How long should your meditation be?* Meditation teachers have different views. One notable teacher recommends beginners start with 20-30 minutes and work up to an hour after a year or two of practice. I do not claim to be a meditation teacher, I am just a practitioner, but I've found that shorter periods work for me. My advice would be to start with 5 minutes for the first month, go to 10 minutes in the second month and then 15 minutes in the third month. I would stay at 15 minutes from the fourth month onwards, but if you decide to seek the advice of a respected meditation teacher and he or she recommends that you practise for longer, by all means follow their advice. The key is this: *don't overdo it, settle on a duration you can keep up!* Meditation is like physical training; a little and often is better than lengthy but occasional bouts of exercise.